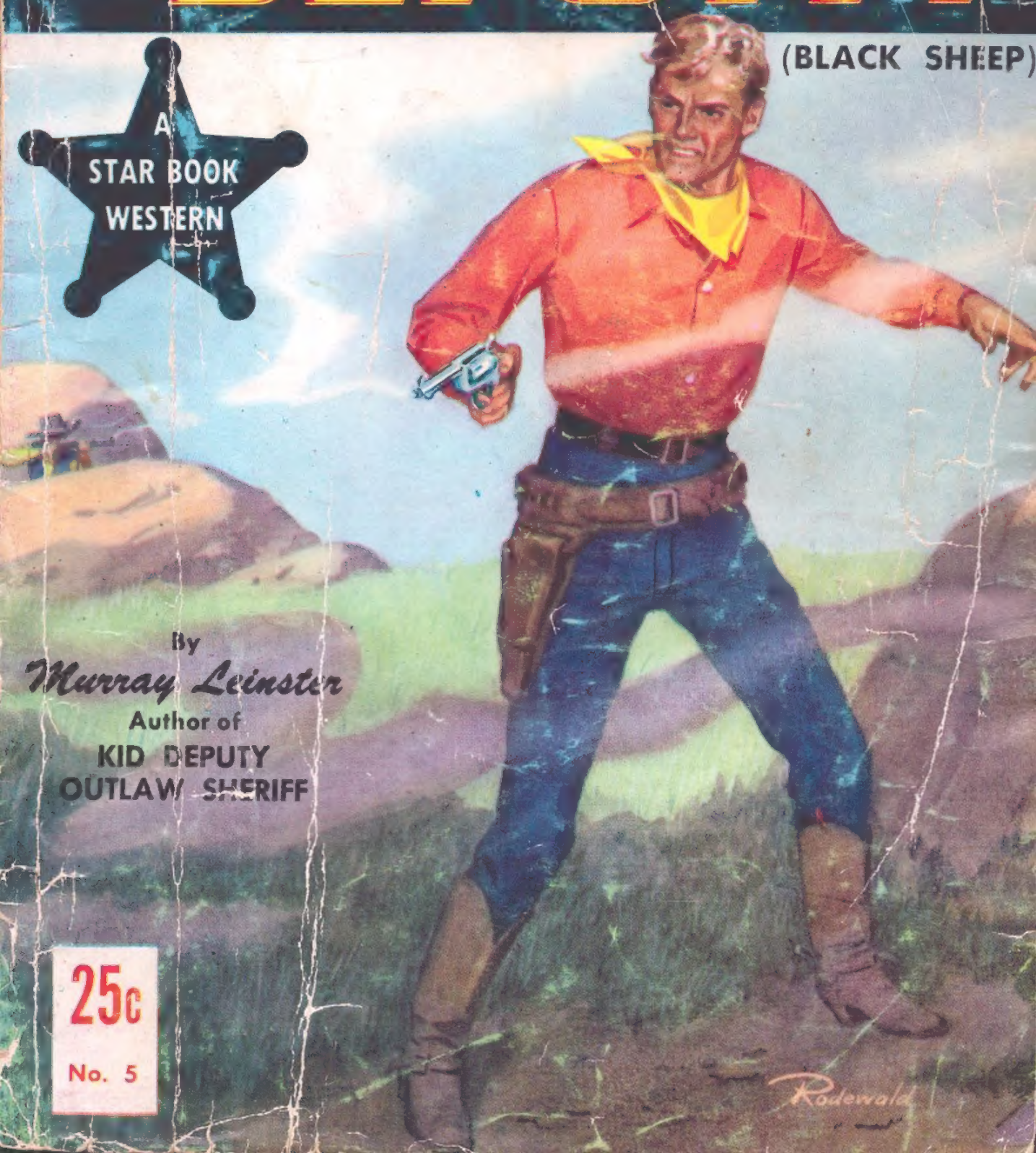
ANC

OUTLAW DEPUTY!

WHAT HAPPENS WHEN SHEEP HERDERS INVADE COW COUNTRY?

(BLACK SHEEP)

A STAR BOOK WESTERN



By *Murray Leinster*

Author of
KID DEPUTY
OUTLAW SHERIFF

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No. 5

WITH his trusty six-shooters swinging from his slim hips . . . With his swift black stallion behind him . . . with the burning will to clear his name . . . With a beautiful woman behind him — Steve Galt reckoned, as he thundered through the wild mesquite, that he could ride straight into the open mouth of Hell and live to tell the tale!

But it was hotter than Hades in the hideout of the rustlers and Steve had to act fast. And after the smoke of the battle had cleared, the name of Galt was respected and feared throughout the range!

OUTLAW DEPUTY

(BLACK SHEEP)

By

MURRAY LEINSTER

(*Author of* TEXAS GUN SLINGER)

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CHAPTER I

STEVE GALT was going home. Riding Duke, the big black horse, through night almost as dark as the horse's hide. Night almost as black as Steve Galt's name in his home country, where the Galts had been known as honest men, once upon a time. Riding with hoofs going clitter-clatter beneath him, and clouds banking up in the sky, and the stars looking small and far away. There'd be no welcome when he got back home. There was just one person who might be glad to see him. A girl. But she'd been only fifteen when he went away and her father had promised coldly that he'd shoot Steve dead if he ever spoke to her again.

Steve Galt rode onward grimly. He didn't want to think about that. There was also one man who might not despise him. One man who was small and dried up and very wise, whom some men hated and some did not, but who all men were careful not to offend. He'd sent for Steve to come back, but Steve didn't want to think about that, either.

Hoofs beneath him thudded as Duke bore him through the night. Steve had been trying to forget a good many things, in the years he'd been away. Now it was hard not to remember, though it was assuredly more pleasant to forget. He'd been the black sheep of all the Galt clan, the disgrace upon the Galt name, the sullen one, the hating one, who'd left his home range hastily between suns before his neighbors could try him for theft and worse. And those neighbors despised him the more for his proved crimes because his father and his family before him had been honorable men. . . .

He was nine years old. It was hot outside the ranch house, but he felt cold and sick all over, though sweat stood out upon him. His eyes burned horribly. His throat ached. The world was suddenly and very terribly empty of its center. Juana bent over him and patted his head.

"Estebanito," she said coaxingly, "you weel go an' look for the las' tam on your *padre,* no? *Pero si, Estebanito!* You weel go, lak a brave boy, an' you weel look an' remember always. Eet ees for you to remember always. See, I weel hol' your han'——."

He thrust her aside roughly, being nine years old. He was sick and white-faced and his reddened eyes were fierce. And his throat

ached and his heart pounded, and each beat was a dull and heavy pain.

"You leave me alone," he said stridently. "I—I'll go. I—I don't want to go. But you leave me alone and I'll go!"

She led him to the door which, until then, had never seemed daunting. She patted his shoulder comfortingly—and it was no comfort. There was no comfort anywhere. There was only emptiness and an ache in his throat and a horrible, dazed sickness all over.

Juana patted him again and opened the door. She thrust him inside and closed the door firmly behind him. The small boy, alone in the terribly still room with his father, did not think of such things. Because this Thing looked so much like his father, and yet it was not his father. His father had gone away somewhere. The Thing that he was supposed to look at was empty, like a house that nobody lives in any longer, and it was alarming on that account. But worse, they were going to take it and put it in a box and bury it under the ground. . . .

The small boy had been told to look, so he looked. And his throat ached, and ached, and his eyes stung unbearably, and suddenly sobs bubbled up horribly from somewhere inside him and he fled from the room making great gasping outcries.

Steve Galt was going home. He was twenty-and-something now, and his eyes were very steady, and somehow men always felt that he knew who was behind him, and why. He rode through darkness with hoofs beating below him, and a starlit cloud of alkali dust swirling slowly in his trail. And he wore two guns which had not the look of ornaments.

He was the black sheep of his family and his home would not welcome him at all. Especially when he demanded of his kin that they do a certain thing which would be costly, in money, and would merely maintain the honor of the family he had disgraced. The two guns slung beside him were the arguments he intended to use. And again he remembered, despite himself . . .

There were clouds of dust still settling toward the horizon. Riding men had gone on home. There was a queer, awkward hush over the bunk house. There was a raw heap of new earth over by the big willow. A little hum of clumsily hushed talk out by the harness shed. The small boy Steve sat in a chair, sunk in a sort of exhausted apathy, his eyes swollen and burning. He had suffered as intensely as it is possible for a boy of nine to suffer from grief.

Loud footsteps on the ranch house porch. They were resonant,

self-assertive footsteps. The self-assertiveness was new, and Steve did not yet understand what it might mean. He waited dully for his Uncle Peter to come into the room. Uncle Peter was going to take care of him. His father had explained it all, very carefully, before he died.

"Y'see, us Galts are a hot-headed bunch, an' sometimes we get plumb foolish. Your gran'pa, he had to leave home back East for fightin' a duel. Folks did that sort o' thing back in th' old days. He come out heah an' he was a rip-roarin' hellion until he got married. I was th' same way. It was your ma that calmed me down. An' if you' like th' rest of us Galts, you' goin' to be kinda foolish until an' unless you get y'self the right kinda wife. Y' Uncle Peter, he kinda missed out on that. He wasn't so lucky with his wife an' that's why he maybe don't appeal t'you so much. But he's all right at bottom, Steve. Us Galts gen'rally are. So if anything—uh—if I don't get over what that dam' fool steer did to me, Steve—why—he's goin' to take care of you."

That explanation made the nine-year-old Steve wait dully while the resonant footsteps came to the door, into the room, and as his uncle stared somewhat resentfully down at him.

"Heah, you!" said Uncle Peter harshly. "Don't set mopin' like that. Go get y' supper an' git off somewhere."

Small Steve did not move. He was exhausted, both by his passionate grief and by the storm of tears which had racked him. He was not capable of thinking, of feeling, of attending to any voice that was merely a voice. Someone who could have taken the small boy and put a comradely hand on his shoulder would have been a god-send, just then.

But his uncle did neither. He had been almost a pensioner on the ranch of Steve's father. Never a partner. And the feeling of dependency had cut deep. Now, well, his brother had understood him. The ranch was his, for life. Then it was to be returned to Steve. Peter Galt could not have endured the thought of being dependent upon a small boy. But he read nine-year-old Steve's exhausted apathy as sullenness. He came over and jerked Steve roughly out of his seat.

"Feelin' bossy, huh?" he demanded harshly. "Feel like you' the boss heah now since you' pa's dead? Well, y'ain't! This heah's my ranch now. When I'm dead you'll get it back. But meantime I'm boss an' you'll jump when I tell you somethin'! An' heah's proof!"

He raised his hand. . . .

Riding homeward, years later, Steve Galt knew that the licking his Uncle Peter had given him, less than an hour after his father's funeral, was responsible for most of what came after. The small boy had hated his uncle with a passionate hatred after that.

Grown up, he rolled a cigarette in the dark. He lighted it, while Duke's hoofs kept up their steady rhythmic thudding on the earth beneath. The match light showed Steve's face still young, of course, with the leanness of youth and iron-hard condition. Set in an habitual expression of repression and reserve. And besides, there was a hint of something that never ought to be in a young man's face. There was something of defiance there. . . .

He was twelve. He went trudging through alkali dust beneath a brazen sky and a blazing sun. The ranch house was a long way back. His throat was dry, but he was not thirsty. There was a fresh cut on his cheek, and the alkali dust stung it, but he knew it without regarding it. He was rather gaunt, this Steve who was twelve years old, and his eyes were capable of a blazing hatred which did not, however, cringe.

A scurrying of small hoofs. He looked up. A tiny horse bobbing into view and out again. A small Stetson waved. Then with a rush and a further scurrying Lucy Harrison reined in amid a cloud of dust. Lucy Harrison, aged ten, in miniature chaps and shirt, and inclined to regret passionately that she was not a boy, yet partly reconciled to her sex because of private plans to marry Steve when they both grew up.

"Steve! What's the matter? Did your horse throw you?"

Steve stopped in his tracks.

"No," he said evenly. "I was just comin' to tell you I can't come along with you-all today, huntin' strays. Y' said y' were goin' to wait for me, so I came along to tell you not to."

Lucy stared down at him, brown as he was, active as he was, nearly as good with a rope and quite as good with a rifle even if she was two years younger. But there was no defiance anywhere in her expression, nor bitterness either. She looked at Steve, puzzled.

"Uncle Peter took my horse," said Steve flatly. "I broke him. I trained him. He's a good horse. Uncle Peter gave him to Cousin Oliver today."

Lucy ground her teeth in comradely hatred.

"I hate Oliver!" she said fiercely.

Steve swallowed.

"He said he didn't want the horse. An' Uncle Peter said he'd

lick him if he didnt' take it. So Oliver took him." Steve fingered the cut on his cheek. "Uncle Peter licked me," he added hardly. "He had to lick somebody."

"I don't see why!" said Lucy fiercely.

"Chub'd licked him," said Steve. "He pounded Uncle Peter to a jelly. Told him he wasn't any better'n a horse thief anyway. So Uncle Peter fired him an' he lit into him. Uncle Peter was a sight. Then he licked me, after Chub went away."

"Good for Chub!" said Lucy vengefully.

"Yeah," said Steve. He added without intonation, "Chub was the last one of the hands my father used to have. Uncle Peter'd fired all the rest. He was a right good friend, Chub was."

"My dad will lend you a horse," insisted Lucy anxiously. "He won't mind! Not if I ask him! Please, Steve! Won't you come?"

"I don't want to ride on a horse," said Steve. He swallowed. "I—I broke that little bay horse. He was mine. I—I don't want to ride on any other horse for a while. I'm goin' back. . . ."

The older Steve knew that it was a trivial thing. There was no reason for it to stand out so vividly among the innumerable other memories. There had been moments of more poignant grief, of more bitter rebellion. Yet that one was as vividly before his eyes and in his ears as—now that he was riding through the darkness—as a little forked tongue of lightning that licked among the dark masses of cloud toward the horizon and the dull mutter of thunder that followed it long after. . . .

When he was fifteen, Swain was foreman of the Block H, and had been for six months. Steve hated him. He was working hard, these days. Doing the work of a full-grown man and getting no pay for it but clothes and grub and a place to sleep. He had horses to ride, of course. He couldn't do a cow hand's work without them. And sometimes he saddled up one of his sorry string and rode away from the ranch house after dark. He didn't say where he was going. He didn't say where he'd been when he came back. He was silent and rather morose, and he hated his Uncle Peter and Swain and Oliver almost with the same intensity.

He hated Oliver more because Oliver had ridden over to Lucy's house one night when Steve was there. He'd seen Steve sitting quietly in a corner, listening to the talk of Lucy's father but watching Lucy intently. Lucy considered herself quite a young lady now, and her adoration of Steve was, quite transparently, concealed.

But this particular morning Steve's hatred burned white hot. It

was a deep, corrosive hatred, so deep that it brought not tears of rage but a savage, still calm.

Swain had accused him of rustling. And Steve, being only fifteen, was so far matured by his hatred that he grinned savagely, dead white beneath his tan, and refused to say anything at all but merely dared Swain to prove it. And Swain was bringing forward damning evidence when Oliver stopped him.

"Somebody's lyin' to you, Swain," said the fifteen-year-old Oliver composedly. "You say this happened Monday night. I know where Steve was Monday night. He was over at the Bar Circle, talkin' to Dick Harrison an' Lucy an' some others. I was there myself."

And Steve was so far embittered and so far from softened by his cousin's fairness that he was not even grateful. He laughed at all of them; at his Uncle Peter, at Oliver, and at Swain, who saw a carefully prepared case falling to the ground.

"You're a damn fool, Oliver," said the boy Steve scornfully. "You' tellin' the truth, sure! But it ain't goin' to do any good. Not to you, anyway. You' pa'd be glad to run me off as a rustler, an' Swain's got his own reasons for wantin' to put the cattle stealin' around here off on somebody!"

Swain growled ferociously. Steve said, with an elaboration of irony of which no boy could be capable:

"You don't know what I mean, huh? I reckon that Mex that takes those little bunches of cattle over Dead Man's Pass is a stranger to you, huh?" Then he said fiercely, "You' tryin' to drive me away from here! Because you' aimin' to rob this ranch like you robbed all the other ranches you ever worked on! An' you ain't goin' to run me off! This was my father's ranch, an' some day it's going' to be mine! An' by Gawd ——" His voice broke because of his hatred; the soul-searing, impotent hatred of a boy whose enemy is a grown man. "By Gawd, some day I'll prove who's a thief around here! If I don't kill you first!"

But the outburst was unwise, as the Steve who rode home in the darkness, years later, could fully understand. He had threatened to kill Swain, and that went about as gossip which Swain industriously spread. So that the fifteen-year-old Steve was credited with being a sullen and dangerous and probably a criminal young fool who had been accused of rustling and answered the accusation only by threats of murdering his accuser. . . .

And all these memories were seen by the grown-up Steve in a grown-up light. The boy Steve had been treated badly, and he had reacted with hatred and defiance, and he had gotten a bad

reputation in consequence. But most of his bad name would have been forgotten as a boy's foolishness if there had been nothing more. If he'd run away at fifteen, perhaps, he would be riding back through the darkness with his earlier misdeeds all obliterated.

Somewhere he heard the indeterminate sound of cattle bedded down for the night. And Steve heard the crisp distinctive hoof beats of another horse. It was a long distance off. Its rider reined in, exactly as if he had heard Duke's hoof beats and had checked his mount to listen.

Steve nodded rather grimly to himself. He made no change in Duke's course or gait. The letter that had brought him back said there was more night-herding being done these days than had ever been necessary before in the memory of man. More cattle were vanishing than had ever disappeared before.

But Steve hadn't come back to worry about rustling. There was something else. There was the Galt pride, the Galt honor, which was imperiled by Uncle Peter. And Steve, as the black sheep of the family, was returning to force the family's most respectable member to do the honorable thing by a neighbor.

There was going to be a storm. All the heavens were covered by black clouds. A little flurry of wind stirred the mesquite leaves so that they rattled dustily. It died down again. It had been just enough to set tiny sand devils to dancing in the darkness. Steve smelled the sharp smell of dust. And suddenly there was before him the last day, the last afternoon, the last moment before he went away, a black sheep past denying. . . .

He was eighteen, and sullenly silent while at his work about the ranch and in the bunk house. Only, sometimes, his eyes burned with hatred when he saw Swain, the foreman. Swain had been foreman of the ranch for years, and the hands were men of his own choosing. Steve had nearly a free choice of what work he would do because Swain wrathfully swore that he was useless and worse, and refused to give him any orders at all. His uncle also strove to ignore him. Steve was fed, and he was lodged, and that was all. There was a raw-boned cow pony which had become tacitly his special mount, because nobody else thought enough of the animal to want him.

It suited him, at eighteen. He vanished into the hills for days at a time on errands of his own. He had somewhere acquired an ancient sixgun and shells for it. When he was seen, he was defiant of all questioning. To his cousin Oliver he was bitingly aloof. He seemed never to see his Uncle Peter. And to any and all

queries as to what he did on his absences from the ranch he was balefully silent. Only Lucy Harrison knew anything about what he did in those hills, and she was still fifteen; and her father regarded with some disquiet her friendship with the boy about whom such unpleasant rumors circulated.

The last day of Steve's ramblings in the hills. He had combed them to their farthest limits, looking for a place he had heard of. The place had been named Hell Sink, and rumor said that it had been a hangout of outlaws in the old days, and that no law officer had ever found it or even the way into it. Steve wanted to find that place for a reason of his own. There were still ugly stories afloat about rustling. There were still cattle missing from time to time. And there were those who pointedly avoided Steve when, as rarely happened, he went into the town of Tres Piños. He'd have been roughly dealt with on sheer suspicion if it had not been for the sheriff. But he received Steve in his office in the jail and talked to him with a certain astringent kindness that was neither patronage nor discouragement. He had been a friend of Steve's father, and he showed just enough friendliness for Steve to keep mutterings of suspicion from growing into outright and violent statements of belief. Which would have meant action.

On this last day, Steve headed into one certain corner of the hills. His raw-boned pony was weary. Steve was tired and hungry. The pony perked up a little as he turned into a certain dimly marked way. It looked as if the pony recognized the path from very many travelings of its length. And Steve let down a little, though the habitual bitterness of his expression did not diminish nor the tightness of his lips relax.

Then, very suddenly, he saw men coming toward him. Men from the home ranch, the Block H. They drew rein at once. And Steve turned first a fiery red, and then quite incredibly pale. He spurred forward.

"What the hell—" he demanded passionately, "what the hell d'you mean pokin' around in here?"

Other men appeared before the first had need to answer. Steve shook with wrath, the terrible wrath of eighteen years which sees its most secret self exposed to public gaze. Swain came riding around a bend in the trail. Steve's Uncle Peter. Then there were lowings, and cattle followed. Not many. Fifteen or twenty head, no more. And Swain growled, and Steve's uncle looked at Steve with a savage scorn in which, as Steve noticed even then, there was no trace of triumph whatever.

"What the hell," repeated Steve, shaking with his rage. "What the hell d' you-all mean by goin' up this trail? What right've you got up there?"

Swain rumbled, "See? He admits it's his place! Hell!"

Steve's uncle said with an embittered scorn:

"What right've I got? The right of trailin' a rustler on my own ground, by Gawd! Maybe you'll get this ranch when I'm dead, but it's my ranch now! An' we found fifteen head o' my cattle in y'corral up theah!"

"You lie, suh!" cried Steve, his voice shrill. "Uncle or no uncle, you lie!"

There was a curious simultaneous movement among the half-dozen men who accompanied Swain and Peter Galt. Half a dozen gun muzzles bore upon Steve. Peter Galt waved them down.

"Lie, hell!" he snapped. "There's y'cabin that y'built for a hangout. There's y'corral that y'built. There's stuff o' yours inside the house!"

"It's my house, sure!" said Steve firecely. "I built it so's I'd have a place to sleep in when I got sick o' sleepin' among the kinda lice Swain hires for cow hands. An' I built the corral for my horse to stay in. It's mine! But you didn't find any stolen cattle in there!"

His uncle regarded him with the same savage scorn.

"It's a good thing y'don't deny it's y'house!" he said bitterly. "You bein' a Galt I thought there'd be somethin' you wouldn't be low enough to sink to! Look theah!"

He fumbled in his pocket and held out something in his hand. It was a snapshot of Lucy Harrison. She'd given it to Steve. He'd hung it up in his cabin, above the bunk he slept in. It had seemed sacred, to him. Now he cried out thickly:

"You—you took that! By Gawd, you'll give it back ——"

"I'm goin' to send it to her pa," said Peter Galt bitterly, "with word that I found it in you' cabin, wheah there was twenty head o' cattle—five o' 'em his!—with theah brands blotted damn clumsy an' not healed yet!"

Steve strangled. Gun-muzzles turned his way again.

"Look at those brands!" raged his uncle. "Look at 'em! My kin rustlin'! I hated y'guts for years, but you' a Galt. You ain't a Galt any longer! I'll give y'till sundown to get to hell away from heah, an' if you' ever on my land again while I'm livin', I'll shoot y'dead!"

The men who had invaded his most secret retreat reined their horses about and went on. Swain had not given a signal they

seemed halfway to expect. Steve still lived. The sound of their horses hoofs died away.

Shaking, Steve went on to his little cabin. It had been searched; ransacked. As if for a hidden hoard of money he might have gathered together by much rustling. Half-blinded by tears of purest fury, he searched the place over. He found tracks. The cattle had been driven into the coral. There were the ashes of a fire in which a running-iron had been heated. It was two days old or more. No signs, at all, that the corral had been regularly used for the penning of stolen cattle,—but that would not outweigh the damning evidence against him.

He searched desperately for hours, for something that would prove what he knew to be the fact,—that the evidence had been planted on him after he'd been trailed to his private hiding-place.

Then he rode out of the hills, sick and raging and desperate. There were just two people in the world whom he wanted to have believe in him. One, of course, was Lucy Harrison. He rode first to her father's ranch house on the Bar Circle. And Dick Harrison got up from the porch and walked out to meet him as he reined in. His jaw was set. Steve reined in and said rather hoarsely:

"Howdy, suh."

"Howdy," said Lucy's father grimly. "I s'ppose you came heah to speak to Lucy. So I'm interferin'. You ain't goin' to. Your Uncle Peter sent me a message just now about what they found in that cabin y'built yourself up in the hills. You know what they found."

"Yes, suh. But I didn't put those cattle there, suh! It was Swain did it, suh! He's been rustlin' right along an' I' been spendin' all my time in the hills tryin' to catch on to how he does it, suh. I hadda good idea a coupla years ago, but he found out I was catchin' on an' he changed his system. So he planted those steers on me!"

Dick Harrison said more grimly still:

"Your pa was my friend. I believed in you a lot, because it don't seem right that your father's son should turn out like you' done. I' disbelieved things folks said about you that I'd ha' believed about anybody else. But I quit."

"It ain't true, suh!" said Steve desperately. "Lucy'll tell you I' been huntin' ——"

"She has told me," said Dick Harrison inexorably. "I b'lieve she b'lieves it. But that's all. Your pa had a good name around heah. I paid him twenty thousan' dollars, once, an' didn't even ask him for a receipt. That's how good the Galt name was, once upon a

time. You' thrown that good name away. But your pa was my friend, so I'm advisin' you to get outa this county. Folks have been missin' too dam' many cattle an' they' gettin' fussy. I'm just advisin' you on that. But I'm tellin' you that if you ever speak to my Lucy again, I'm comin' after you an' comin' with a gun out. Now git, boy."

Steve tried to speak, and choked, and rode away. He did not even look back to see if Lucy, perhaps, looked after him from a window. He did not look back at all. He rode on into Tres Piños with his face a chalky white and his eyes set and fixed. He was just eighteen. He intended to tell the Sheriff what he did know, and then ride out to the home ranch and kill Swain and get himself killed by the hands Swain had chosen and who would undoubtedly want to avenge the foreman.

But he did not. The Sheriff had been his father's friend too. And somehow—Steve never quite understood the combination of wisdom and irony which was the fruit of the Sheriff's fullest knowledge of young men—somehow the Sheriff had packed him off, instead, before a warrant could be issued which the Sheriff would have to serve. . . .

Steve was on his way home to prevent, as the black sheep of the family, further disgrace to the family name. It was his mission to use the sixguns hanging at his hips to prevent the most respectable of all the Galts from bringing dishonor upon the clan.

CHAPTER II

THUNDER growled loudly over by the horizon. Then Duke shied at something, and immediately afterward stood still until his master should tell him what to do. It was utterly dark, now, and the whole sky was swallowed up by clouds so that it was with difficulty that Steve made out a totally unfamiliar fenceline coming out of the blackness on the one hand and vanishing into it again on the other.

He frowned to himself and instinctively glanced upward for some indication of his course. There was none. And he had been so completely lost in thought that he had not even subconsciously taken note of the ground he traveled over. He literally did not know where he was within a couple of miles.

"Shucks," he drawled. "I put too much of th' job on you, Duke.

I forgot y'don't know your way around here. Me, I was born not far off, but I didn't pay 'ttention, so we' lost,—some. Hmmm. . . . Block H ranch house'll be over thataways somewheres. No tellin' just where. This'll be a line fence Mistuh Harrison must've put up since I' been gone. Didn't use to have one along here."

He rode a little closer to the fence. The posts were light-colored. Steve fingered one.

"Mmh. . . . New. Well, we follow the line, Duke. It's goin' to be wiggly, more or less, so y'want to watch sharp. An' when we get to some place I recognize, we'll know where we' at an' act accordin'."

He headed Duke around and went on in the darkness. He was more keenly alive to his surroundings, now. He rode slowly, as one rides who has lost his landmarks and is not particularly worried about the fact. Duke picked his way cautiously among small clumps of sage and chaparral. Lightning flickered low down upon the edge of the world. Another sudden puff of wind swept across the range.

He listened to the sound of the breeze upon the range-growths. It went away and away and away into the distance, and the still air it left behind it was appreciably cooler and more moist.

"This's nice range, Duke," Steve observed, with the fresher smells in his nostrils. "You'll like it. We' comin' back here to live some day, if Uncle Peter ain't persuaded the neighbors to be waitin' as a lynchin' party to welcome me. . . . Funny me gettin' lost without knowin' it though."

There was no sound but the gradually dying-away noise of the wind and Duke's hoof-beats on the ground. Then thunder muttered again. The horse moved delicately onward. He suddenly swerved off to the right, moving around some object.

"What's that?"

Steve stared down to where objects of curiously definite shape had blocked the path Duke would otherwise have taken. He identified the objects by their shape.

"Wire. Rolls of it." He strained his eyes. "Fence stops here. They were just puttin' it up. Now I wonder why they were doin' that kinda thing?"

Before Steve left home there hadn't been much fencing around Tres Piños. Cattle pile up on them breaking them if they get frightened, cutting themselves on them if they're barbed—and plain wire is no good at all—and generally raising hell with themselves, the fences, and the neighbors. With good neighbors, fences aren't

needed anyhow. But Dick Harrison was running a fence line between the Block H and the Bar Circle along this part of the line, anyhow. Why?

He rode on, still a little at a loss as to his exact location. He knew, of course, that he must be somewhere along the boundary between the two ranches. But that line was irregular, following a shallow depression which at some time or another might have been a stream-bed.

He was mildly vexed with himself for not noticing more closely the turns Duke had made in choosing his own path. Steve had been remembering some rather embittering things, and in doing so he had lost touch with the cardinal points.

And suddenly, very far away, there was a faint "Pop!" Then another, in haste. The four other shots, deliberately spaced.

Steve turned his head and listened alertly.

There was no other sound. There was no light anywhere on earth or in the sky. The shots might have been somebody shooting at a coyote. But not many men would be bothering about a coyote on a night like this, with a storm due to break. It might, too, have been a night-herd shooting at a lobo. But that was unlikely, too. Four shots deliberately spaced, after two fired in haste. . . . They did not sound like a man shooting at a wild creature.

Steve turned Duke's head about.

"We'll go look. If it's a man-shootin' ——. Time was when folks credited me with all the hell-raisin' around here. I'll go see who's takin' my place in the public eye."

Duke began to move a little more rapidly, turning his head this way and that and choosing a path with much more certainty than seemed possible in such darkness.

He was headed directly for the source of the sound when out of the blackness ahead came the pounding and thudding of a horse's hoofs. Steve heard it, despite a far-away murmuring sound which he knew was rain racing across the parched dry range. The other horse was tearing through the night in something approaching panic. It was utterly reckless of possible holes or rocks. And a man who would stop to shoot at a coyote would either be a night-herd rider—who would have to stay with the cattle and couldn't be running away like this—or else he would have started for home a long time before, when the coming of a storm was first apparent.

Steve reined in. His hand dropped tentatively to his hip. He widened his eyes, waiting for another flash. It came, and showed the other rider almost on top of him.

Darkness. The other horse shied crazily and went careening away at a tangent. But it had passed almost at arm's length.

"Hey, fella!" called Steve.

Running like this, the other man was more probably somebody who had been shot at than somebody who had been shooting. And in these parts Steve would more probably be in sympathy with the man who had to run away, anyhow. He turned his head to follow the racing flight of the other horse. The rapid staccato of hoofs lessened. They stopped. Then the other horse came trotting back. Lightning behind a cloud somewhere—hence a mere momentary grayish glow—showed the other horse and rider as a vague bulk, moving toward him. A few seconds later another flash showed them closer, the horse stepping skittishly high, the rider hunched down as if he did not want his face to be seen.

"Howdy," said the other rider. His voice was peculiarly strained and blurred. It sounded almost as if he were anxious to disguise it.

"Howdy, fella," drawled Steve. "You behold a wanderin' stranger. I was ridin' hither an' yon an' I got lost. Could you tell me, maybe, where I'd find grub an' a bunk for tonight?"

"Yeah," said the other voice. It remained strained and blurred. "Th' Block H is over theah about four miles. Y'can't miss the ranch house." A pause. "Say, did you heah shots jus' now?"

"Yep," admitted Steve.

Another pause. Lightning split the sky,—and Steve was looking at the muzzle of a gun not three feet from his middle.

"Stick 'em up!" snarled the other man, his voice rising almost to panic pitch. "Stick 'em up or I'll drill you!"

The gun clicked unpleasantly, touching Steve's belt-buckle. The other man was close indeed. Steve felt the other horse's foreshoulder touch against his leg. Then a hand was fumbling—and trembling as it fumbled—at his holsters.

The other man reined back. Steve's belt felt unpleasantly light. A man who is accustomed to the comfortable tug of sixguns at his hips feels queer without them.

"I'll drop my han's now," drawled Steve, "if y'ain't got any objection."

His knees tightened a little. Duke got ready. If this man were an enemy—why—they'd plunge into him and then away into the blackness if he weren't toppled clean out of the saddle. But ——

"This is—ain't a hold-up," panted the other man. "I want your boots. I'll pay for 'em. Quick!"

"Right fond of my boots," protested Steve mildly.

"You want me to drill you an' take 'em?"

"Under th' circumstances," drawled Steve, "I rec'n I got to oblige."

He stripped off his boots. The other man snatched them with his left hand. Something slapped across Duke's saddle and made him jump.

"Here's pay for 'em," panted the voice. "Wait a minute ——"

He backed his horse while Steve's fingers amazedly assured him that the thing slapped across the saddle was a money-belt. More, that it was weighted down with coins. And if the coins were anything but lead, they assuredly paid for Steve's boots. But Steve thought they were gold.

Something dropped to the earth with a thud. Another thud followed it.

"Here's boots, too," panted the other man. "There's plenty in the money-belt to pay for yours. Your guns'll be by the boots. Right here ——"

A gun bellowed, pointed toward the earth. In its flash the spotted legs of a pinto pony were outlined and photographed on Steve's brain forever.

Ten seconds later the pinto pony and its rider had whirled about and were streaking it into the darkness.

Then, though, there came light of another sort entirely. Steve sat quite still and fixed his eyes where the other man had been. He waited. And very abruptly the sky tore itself asunder. Something vivid and jagged and blinding leaped across mid-sky. This was no pallid flame, but lurid fire. All the world was brighter than day while it lasted. And in that infinitely brief instant, Steve saw a tumbled heap upon the ground which was unquestionably his boots and guns.

Blinded by the succeeding darkness, and almost stunned by the thunderous reverberation which followed the lightning-flash, Steve dismounted and groped on the ground. A little flurry of damp cold wind played about him and died away. He found the boots. He slipped his feet into them. They fitted rather well. And Steve found his guns too.

"Duke," he said soberly, "I got me a idea we'd better get goin' over where those shots came from. If I' got to be in another man's boots, I want to know what he's gone an' done.

He stirred the reins, and Duke broke into a trot.

"Somebody's got shot," he observed with ironic humor, "an' they're all set to blame it on me. Just like old times, Duke! If

that was Uncle Peter or his pet foreman Swain, I'd say they'd gone an' done it out of habit. I'm wonderin' how far to where the shots came from. That fella was makin' time."

"He was in a line-rider's shack or a squatter's shanty," said Steve meditatively, "because there'd have to be a dirt floor to make him want to change his boots. Shacks that ain't used much have dirt floors 'ccount of things holin' up under wooden ones. Squatters' cabins have dirt floors 'cause squatters are so dam' lazy. . . . Whoever got killed musta been killed for somethin' outside o' money, because that fella flung this cash at me. Musta belonged to the one that was shot."

The rain was closer now. He could hear not only the dull drumming sound of its fall, but a sibilant washing sound. There were little flurries of wind, cool and damp, which contrasted curiously with the dry hotness of the air a few minutes before. All the while the drumming roar of the rain drew nearer. The tappings increased in rapidity, like a drumroll speeding up its tempo. And then, quite suddenly, with a rush and a roar, the forefront of the storm rushed upon Steve and instantly thereafter the thunder and lightning burst loose overhead in a raging bedlam of noise and licking flames.

Steve was soaked to the skin in seconds. Water rolled off Duke's hide in little rivulets that glistened in the lightning-flashes. Wind tore at horse and rider alike, flinging what seemed solid masses of water at them and flinging it with such force that it stung where it struck.

". . . Kinda dampish, Duke. . . . Sort o' fireworks illumination for the wanderer's return, hey? It oughtn't to be much further. . . ."

Fiercer and more savage grew the thunder. Rain seemed to descend in solid masses. The lightning split the sky from horizon to horizon in maniacal leaps and bounds, its growling ever louder.

And then came a bolt so vivid and so blinding that for one split second the whole world seemed on fire. The hurrying, lowering clouds overhead were outlined despite the thick mist of falling rain. To the uttermost reaches of the range, the earth gleamed out as brightly as if in day. And then blackness descended once more and a sudden silence—which was the pounding of falling water on the thirsty earth—seemed to wait for the roaring of thunder which would follow.

In that moment of silence Steve spoke, drawling:

"There's the place, Duke. He must've come from here."

He swerved his mount and went soberly on toward a tiny shack which had leaped into view during the lightning-flash's duration.

The thunder-roll from the great flash was just beginning when he turned toward it. And the bellowing noise had passed from one horizon to another and was growling back to mid-sky again when he shouted before the hut. Then other thunder took up the outcry and made a sheer torrent of sound which set the flimsy door to quivering under his fingers when—dismounted—he fumbled his way to it and knocked.

Steve pushed open the door and stepped inside. He backed the door shut against the wind and stood listening. Rain upon the roof. Wind against the sides of the shack. A weird moaning above the chimney. The dripping sound of water, falling from his hat brim to the floor. No movement nor any sound beyond these. No sign of life within the hut.

But there was the acrid smell of burnt powder.

Steve fumbled behind him. A latch. He dropped it into place to fasten the door against the insistent wind. He struck a match, which wavered wildly in tiny gusts of air. He held it in his cupped hands. A bare, yellow, clay floor. Cobwebs upon the ceiling-joists, looking lacy and fresh and fragile in the match-light. A smoke-stained, mostly mud Mexican fireplace, crudely built. A calendar upon the wall, tattered and torn and four years old. But that was not the important thing.

Steve saw the dead man.

He lay sprawled out on his face. Boots. A khaki-colored shirt. No chaps, just khaki-colored riding pants. Stains. . . . But the worst stain was on the clay floor.

Steve dropped the match and lighted another before the first burned his finger. He searched composedly for something for a more permanent light. He found it. A bottle on a dingy shelf with an inch and a half of candle stuck in the neck. It lighted readily. It hadn't been extinguished long. It made a flickering, yellowish glow throughout the small shack. Then Steve turned sombrely to the dead man on the floor.

It was Dick Harrison. Lucy Harrison's father. The owner of the Bar Circle. The man who had sworn he would shoot Steve if he ever dared speak to Lucy again, and for whose sake Steve had returned, nevertheless.

Steve stared queerly at the dead face, not yet cold. His lips tightened. This was going to look bad!

Then he set to work professionally to find out what he could. There was a bullet through Harrison's heart from the front. Another through his shoulder, also from the front. Then four

other bullet-holes, all in Dick Harrison's back and at angles which showed they had been put in him as he lay on the floor, already dead.

His gun had not been drawn, though it looked as if his hand might have been on its butt at the instant he was shot. Steve could not be sure about that. There was not much that he could be sure about, anyhow. The dead man's money-belt was gone. The floor contained many footprints on the clay, of just the boots Steve was now enforcedly wearing. The bullets in the dead man's body were—judging by the holes they made entering—of the same calibre as Steve's gun. And, this being merely a line-rider's shack, it looked as if Harrison had met somebody here, and that somebody had quarreled with him and shot him dead, and then fired hysterically until his gun was empty. And before he'd ridden away, the killer had taken Harrison's money-belt just to make it look like a robbery-murder. And there had been just about enough time for him to realize the extreme danger of discovery through his boot-tracks and the money-belt.

Steve nodded to himself. Not a planned killing, evidently. The killer was just thinking about the danger that he'd be traced, somehow, when he'd plunged past Steve in the storm, and with a sort of desperate inspiration he'd swung about to stick up Steve.

It had been a clever thought, at that, for him to force Steve to exchange boots. It was the sort of thing that made a totally unconvincing story for Steve to tell. It was cleverer for him to thrust the money-belt on Steve. But was it cold-blooded reasoning, or merely an hysterical desire to be rid of the money-belt as a memento of a killing the killer passionately regretted?

Steve could not tell. But he could see how beautifully the thing worked out to his disadvantage. His return the day of Harrison's killing—the night of Harrison's killing. The well-known fact that Harrison had told him he'd kill him if he ever dared speak to Lucy again. He wasn't wanted around here, anyway. He was the black sheep of the Galt family. And his return to stop Uncle Peter from collecting a debt already paid. . . .

There was nothing he could do for Lucy's father, though it looked as if Lucy's father, dead, might do a great deal to harm him. But Steve went out of the shack with his face set in rather stern lines. He refastened the door carefully. He mounted Duke and set off purposefully through the storm.

"Black sheep!" he said without humor. "That's me! The black sheep of th' family! Lucy was the only friend I had, but she can't

help believin' I killed her pa. When Swain an' Uncle Peter an' Oliver get through provin' it, they'll have me believin' it myself!"

He laughed again, not very pleasantly.

He rode on, his lips twisted. Rain beat upon him. Thunder raged above him. He laughed for the third time.

"An' I came back to do Harrison a favor!"

When, a little later, a thin yellow light came through the steady downpour of rain, Steve paused and refilled the one chamber in his gun that had been discharged by the man who had forcibly bought his boots. An idea struck him then, and he reined Duke in while he got out his knife. When he rode on down to Block H ranch house he was smiling queerly. Because his boots would no longer quite fit the tracks in the shack where the dead man lay.

CHAPTER III

STEVE actually rode up to the ranch house singing. When the bunk house door opened and someone peered out at him, he laughed.

"Hello, Swain!" he called in ironic amusement, "Where's the fatted calf? The prodigal's come back. I'm aimin' to speak to Uncle Peter for a while."

A light smote on him, the beam of a powerful flashlight. As it outlined him in the rain—with glittering droplets darting meteor-like through its core—Steve's hands dropped to his hips.

"Turn that off, Swain," he drawled, "or I'll shoot it off."

The light went out. Steve laughed in the darkness, with rain pouring off his body in streams, and with lightning making a flickering, eerie, fitful sort of illumination.

"Where's Uncle Peter?" he asked amusedly above the drumming of rain and the growl of thunder. "I reckon he ought to be comin' out to shake his head over me, anyways. Send him out to talk to me, Swain!"

There was a buzzing sound, next time the thunder intermitted for an instant. It came through the continuous washing murmur of the rain. Swain's voice, rumbling. He'd been in the bunk house, perhaps giving orders for the next day. Now he was telling the Block H hands something, but only the tone of his voice came through the sound of falling water. No words were distinguishable.

The tone, though, was savage and possibly a little more than alarmed.

"Don't try any tricks Swain!" called Steve drily, smiling mirthlessly in his saddle. "I'm on to most of your kinda tricks. I ain't lightin'. An' I don't aim to hang around the ranch any exceptin' as I'm hopin' to warn Uncle Peter. Call 'im to the door."

"Can't come," snarled Swain in the bunk house door.

"His rheumatism got worse?" queried Steve with an exaggerated solicitude. "How about Cousin Oliver? One or the other of 'em will do."

"He ain't home," snarled Swain.

Duke tended to settle down, and Steve touched him lightly with the spur. Duke moved restlessly from place to place. In the fitful, unforeseeable flashes of light he appeared now here, and now there. He was not in the same spot for any two seconds. It would not be easy to draw a bead on Steve by one lightning-flash and pull the trigger by the next. By the second, Steve would be somewhere else.

"Cousin Oliver better be home," repeated Steve drily. "I know you, Swain. If you won't play, shut up! One of you other fellas go in th' ranch house an' rout out either Uncle Peter or Cousin Oliver. An' the rest of you stick around. I want you t'hear what I got to say."

Growling, Swain broke cover from the bunk house and went lumbering through the downpour to the ranch house. Steve watched him, one hand at his hip.

"Right touchin', Swain," he said sardonically, "you trustin' yourself out in the open with a fella like you say I am in shootin' distance. Didn't you say once that you were like to resign here, because y'didn't want to shoot Uncle Peter's nephew an' it'd be a case of doin' that or gettin' plugged in y'bunk some night?"

Cursing, Swain stamped into the big, sprawling ranch house in which only a single light glowed. And now Steve touched Duke again with the spur, and Duke fidgeted nervously. He was not trying to unseat Steve, of course. Duke would not try that. But with only the fitful gleams of now-diminishing lightning to shoot by, the increased fidgeting of the black horse made Steve an even less promising target in case—say—someone were to try a shot from one of the ranch house windows.

The flickering light showed Swain coming out of the ranch house again. He stood on the porch, lowering. A slighter, younger figure had come out with him and waited nervously, partly behind the foreman.

"Heahs y'cousin," growled Swain. "Now talk, an' get to hell away!"

Steve laughed once more. But the lightning showed him as not at all relaxed or reassured. He was all alertness, and Duke's arched neck and dancing feet showed that he was ready to plunge in any necessary direction at any desirable instant.

"You forget," drawled Steve, mockingly. "You forget, Swain, that you' just the foreman, an' I'm goin' to be ownin' the Block H some day. Black sheep always come home to roost, Swain, an' kickin' you out is goin' to be the first thing I do. But that ain't what I came here tonight to tell you."

Steve's voice changed suddenly. It was cold and hard when his next words came out.

"You, Cousin Oliver! Listen here to me! My pa, he owned the Block H. He left it to your pa as long as he lives—to keep him from tryin' to cheat me more'n he could help, most likely. But when your pa dies, it comes to me. While your pa owns it, I ain't got a dam' thing to say about the Block H ——"

"Y' dam' right you ain't!" snapped Swain.

"But," went on Steve brittlely, "I have got some things to say about somethin' else! My pa loaned Dick Harrison, of the Bar Circle, some money. I know about it. Dick Harrison paid it back. I know about that, too. If my pa didn't give 'im a receipt, it was because they were both honest men an' didn't need papers to keep 'em from cheatin' each other. Now, I' been hearin'—never mind how—about Uncle Peter findin' those papers that Dick Harrison insisted on makin' out when he borrowed that money. An' I heard that Uncle Peter, he's tryin' to collect that money all over again. Which I aim to stop!"

The younger man was excessively nervous. The intermittent white flickerings of lightning showed him to be as fidgety as Duke. But he said nothing. It was Swain, the foreman, who said wrathfully:

"What y'uncle does ain't none o' your business!"

"No?" asked Steve coldly. "But if he dies, all the deals he's got on hand kinda become my business. An' if he don't drop that affair right away, I aim to do some shootin' so it will be my business! That's what I came here to say! You tell your pa, Cousin Oliver, that I'm aimin' to see my pa ain't disgraced by Uncle Peter bein' that kinda crook. I rec'n he's been robbin' me, but that's in the family. I can stand it like I stood a lot o' things before I went away. But I came back here to see that he don't rob my pa's

friends because they trusted my pa! An' if he tries, I'll come shootin'! That means him, an' it means you, Cousin Oliver, an' I'll throw in a coupla slugs o' lead for Swain just for good measure."

He reined Duke about and started off, rain falling between him and those in the bunk house and on the ranch house porch like a veil that thickened as he moved away.

"I'll tell Harrison yuh' around!" shouted Swain savagely after him. "He'll be glad to heah it."

The last was raging irony. But Steve rode on without any answer. Yet that last shout was something of a shock. A man who knows that another man is dead simply does not think of threatening to send a message to him. And Steve had felt almost sure that the killing of Dick Harrison had been in some fashion engineered from the Block H.

He was keenly alert for sounds of pursuit for a mile or more. It is always dangerous to have several men know of a killing. But one man, or two—perhaps Swain himself might come racing through the rain. . . .

No one came. Rain poured down in sheets. Water splashed up before Duke's hoofs as he moved. But the thunder and lightning gradually lessened. By the time Steve was two miles from the ranch house he knew that within an hour or less the skies would magically clear. Rain about the Tres Piños section either rains or not. There are no halfway measures.

"Swain," he drawled to the dripping but attentive Duke, "he said he was goin' to tell Dick Harrison I'm around. But Dick Harrison is dead. I didn't report that fact. It wouldn't ha' been wise. If he'd known about the killin', he wouldn't ha' thought of sayin' that. An' I hadda hunch the killin' was arranged from the Block H. I rec'n I'm wrong."

Matters had arranged themselves very neatly to support such a hunch as Steve now reluctantly abandoned. His return to his home range had come about because a reason for killings had turned up between the Block H and the Bar Circle. The Sheriff had written Steve. When he'd persuaded him to go away under a cloud rather than stay and be killed in a storm of gunfire at his father's ranch, the Sheriff had promised Steve to keep him posted on all developments affecting the Block H and more especially the matter of rustling—of which he believed Steve innocent. And his last letter, written in crabbed handwriting on lined paper, had added to such details as the coming of a detective

from the Cattleman's Association, the other fact that there was hell to pay between Steve's uncle and Dick Harrison.

"The rustlin is gettin worse an worse an its dam clever," the Sheriff had written. "You aint got any reason to kick because you couldn't ketch them at it because I aint able to either an its been going on a dam long time. Yore Uncle Peter has had to buy a lot of stock from other ranches to keep his range stocked an I hear he says hes losin steady. Swain is in full charge over on the Block H on account of your uncle bein laid up with rheumatism. I aint seen him personal for a year. Maybe more. An if Swain is doin the rustlin hes got all the chance in the world. I wish I could ketch him at it. If hes doin it hes good. Yore Uncle Peter aint so popular nowadays because hes startin suit against Dick Harrison for a debt Dick owed your pa. Dick says he insisted on makin out papers for it when he borrowed it. Your pa wouldn't of asked for them. An he says he paid it back an both him an your pa forgot all about a receipt knowin each other like they done. Personal I believe Dick Harrison paid it. But he aint got any proof an maybe hell have to pay it over again which will be hell on wheels for Dick bein hes lost so many cattle through those dam rustlers. Lucy is well.

"I think maybe it would be a good trick for you to come back now because that money Dick owned your pa would of been part of what your uncle would have to turn over to you when he died. If you are on the spot an say you believe it was paid maybe it will do some good. A jury would jump at a excuse to let Dick off anyways because most everybody knows hes a honest man an most folks believe yore uncle is just bein bossed around by Swain, bein laid up. Yore Cousin Oliver aint much. Nobody says much against him but nobody says much for him either. I guess he would of been a good enough sort if he had been raised right. But he aint.

"So I guess you better come back. This rustlin business has got me mad. The Cattleman's Association has sent a detective around here an hes pretty good but he aint found anything yet. He spends most of his time poking around in the hills behind the Block H which seems to show he dont think so much of Swain either. His name is Hamby. . . ."

The Sheriff's spelling was not orthodox, nor his methods of dealing with the criminally inclined, either. But Steve had read

that letter, and re-read it, until he could see each stroke of the crabbed writing as he rode through the lessening downpour.

The air was cool and washed clean of dust. Smells came out in amazing variety. Duke's hoofs made squashing sounds as he went through the surface-mud the rain had left. From time to time he splashed in a strictly temporary puddle. And presently his shoes clanked on bare stone, and Steve knew exactly where he was.

"Juana an' Miguel used to live somewheres around thisaway. Over yonder. . . ."

He turned toward one of the lower spurs of the hills which here projected into the more level range. Ten minutes' start, and anybody could be lost to possible pursuit, from Miguel's house. It was a very convenient location for a man who might have things on his conscience from time to time.

Steve rode on steadily. In ten minutes or so he saw the tiniest possible glow of light. He changed his course a trifle and presently the hills loomed higher and higher. The light became distinct. It came from a little, Mexican-style house. There were the smells of pigs and chickens and horses about it—all of them made considerably more pungent by the recent rain.

Steve dismounted as dogs set up a startled, frightened uproar. He called above the din:

"Juana! Miguel! Abra la puerta! Es yo!"

The dogs continued to make a terrific tumult. Yappings. Barkings. Hysterical outcries. The number of dogs was suspicious, and their noisiness was notable. Miguel often had things on his conscience, apparently.

Steve shouted again. Then a heavy wooden shutter opened a very small crack and Juana's voice came out.

"Quien es?"

"Es yo." Steve grinned. *"Estebanito, Juana."*

He hadn't thought of that nickname for a long time. *"Estebanito"*—Little Steven. But it ought to be an open sesame to the house of his old nurse. It was.

There were exclamations within the house. The door opened a crack, an eye peeped out, and then the woman made a shrill clamor of joy. Steve grinned, and the mockery vanished from his expression.

"Yep," he told her comfortably. "It's me. The ol' black sheep come home for a while. Ask Miguel if he's got stable-room for my horse, an' then I'll come in an' see what you got to eat."

Miguel came out, thin and lath-like, to be hailed sternly by Juana and ordered to put on a *serape* before venturing into the night air. He went back meekly and came beaming out again.

"How deed you come, *muchacho?*" he demanded. *"Y cuando?* W'en? *Juana, se me di* ——"

After the first attempt at English, Miguel slipped into a flood of dobie Spanish. His face spread into the widest of grins, he led the way to a shelter for Duke.

The shed that served as stable was at once pungent, leaky, and surprisingly strong. He lighted a lantern and inspected Duke admiringly, while his own solitary horse thrust an aged and inquisitive head over the side of a stall.

"You' careful of your animals," suggested Steve drily, nodding at the lockable stalls and tight walls. They hinted, as a matter of fact, that Miguel might sometimes want to keep an animal from being observed for a day or so.

"Si," agreed Miguel. *"Por Dios,* these rus'lers, they tak' even *mi Rosinante,* eef I do not lock heem up. They are *mal hombres, Estebanito."*

"Yeah," agreed Steve in his turn. "Le's go see if Juana can dig up some grub for me. I just came from the Block H," he added casually, "but they didn't feed me."

The lantern in Miguel's hand shook and quivered. He stared at Steve with his mouth dropped open. Then he blew out the lantern with a gasp and started to run toward the house.

"Hey! What's the matter?"

"I get *mi* gun!" panted Miguel. "I run away! They come 'ere! They keel you! They keel me! They keel everybody all aroun'! 'Ell! Damn *Juana! Juana!"*

He burst into the house and made for his long, ancient musket on pegs above the fireplace. Steve arrived in the doorway just in time to see Juana angrily strike his hands from it.

"Burro" she cried angrily. *"No Estebanito* ——" Then she took the gun away from him and slapped his face. She saw Steve grinning in the doorway. *"Que hay?"* she demanded.

"I came here from the Block H," he explained.

"They keel heem," said Miguel agitatedly. "They keel me. Maybe, *tal vez,* they keel you too. Oh, 'ell! Oh, damn!"

He wrung his hands. Juana looked anxiously at Steve.

"You look be'ind, *Estebanito?* You see they come not?"

"Sort of," Steve assured her. "An' they can't track me, on account of the rain."

Juana sighed gustily in relief. She replaced the musket.

"Ah! *Bueno!* But thees *burraso,* 'ee deed not theenk of that. I knew *mi Estebanito* would know!"

She returned to her cookery, blandly calm and enormously fat.

"I didn't bother much about it," said Steve. "They' got somethin' of their own to worry about. An' so have I. Do you know whose boots these are?"

He thrust out his leg. Miguel inspected them and shook his head. Juana glanced at them and shrugged. The shrug looked something like a minor earthquake.

"Hm. It's new from the store," said Steve, dismissing the subject. "Somebody wanted to get rid of 'em right bad. So he gave 'em to me. I wondered who 'twas. What's happened since I' been away?"

He smiled faintly while the pair of them wrangled furiously as to who should tell him. Juana was somewhat handicapped, of course, by the fact that she had immediately set to work to feed Steve, without request or order. But her voice rose above the crackling of the fire and the sizzling of fat, and even above the voluble, sibilant dobie Spanish of her husband.

They were not, therefore, what anybody would call estimable characters. Miguel, gray at the temples without achieving a distinguished appearance, would not have chosen a home site which was practically a bolthole.

Immediately he had left, the whole countryside had heard of the proof of his guilt of rustling. The twenty ticky, brand-blotted cattle found in his private corral were held at the Block H ranch house on display, for the complete clearing of his uncle's skirts of any responsibility for what Steve might do.

The pair went into lurid details of the completeness with which all the rustling of the past had been laid to him. Especially since after his departure the number of cattle stolen seemed to rise to new heights, as if in departing he had merely gone into hiding, and from hiding had increased his thefts from pure hatred of the world.

"But," said Miguel parenthetically—and absentmindedly—"eet was not you who deed that."

"No," agreed Steve more drily still. "It wasn't me. Who was it, Miguel?"

Miguel's mouth dropped startledly open. Then he said in a tone of injured innocence:

"I was een jail, *Estebanito.* How could I know?"

"You prob'ly do, just the same," said Steve rather grimly. "But let it go. What next?"

The rustling went on. A steady, constant, consistent vanishing of cattle. Not in big bunches. Five or ten at a time. Fifteen and twenty at a time. Strangely enough, the cattle seemed almost to be hand-picked for disappearance. "Markers"—conspicuously colored or marked cattle which could readily be recognized and served to estimate the number of cattle in any given section of the range—"markers" seemed to be marked by the rustlers as well as by their owners. Cattle disappeared, but markers remained. Whoever the rustlers were, they worked calmly and deliberately and very plainly never took any chances.

"Thee Block H," said Juana placidly, forking out tortillas to put on a plate for Steve, "thee Block H, eet los' an' los' an' los' cattle unteel the *Señor* Galt he was almost crazee! He offered much monee for the name of thee rustlers."

Miguel rolled his eyes heavenward.

"*Si*," he said piously. "*En verdad* the herds grew less an' less day by day. Until the *Señor* Swain grew wrathful an' put hees feeder-cattle up in thee hills."

Steve stared.

"Up in th' hills?" he demanded. "Hell! That's invitin' the rustlers to take 'em! It's just where they could clean up! Drive off a bunch now, an' another one tomorrow ——"

"*Si*," agreed Miguel, "but thee *Señor* Swain, 'ee said that it was upon thee open range that thee rustlers mus' work. An' all men agreed that eet mus' be so, since the Block H ceased to lose so many. But no one could understand."

"I s'pose," said Steve, his eyes meditative, "I s'pose that other ranchers started runnin' their cattle up in the hills too."

"*Porque no?*" asked Miguel. "Eet was proven wise. *Seguro*, they sent their cattle into thee hills also."

"Go on," said Steve.

The Block H losses were cut down by the apparently foolish move of running masses of its stock up in the hills. Other outfits grazed closer and closer to the tumbled ground. But the best that could be said was that their losses from rustlers did not increase through the proximity of the tangled ravines and valleys which should have been a rustlers' paradise.

"An' then," said Miguel. "Then the *Señor* Galt, 'ee was taken seek. An' then thee rustlers became bold indeed."

Then Juana chimed in to carry on the tale, beaming as Steve

devoured the food she'd cooked. The number of cattle disappearing rose sharply. It increased to tens, twenties, to fifties and sometimes even hundreds of cattle vanishing in single nights. Not every night, of course, but the Block H lost so many cattle that Swain, acting for Peter Galt, bought more than seven hundred head from distant ranches to keep the range stocked. He chose remote brands, he said grimly, because whoever was rustling had worked out too good a system of selling cattle from the Tres Piños section. He'd try some other brands.

And he did. He bought Injun Head and Double Wheel and Lazy Eights and Skullbone cattle, vented their markings, and ran them with the Block H herds. And it was a fact that he seemed to lose fewer of such rebranded cattle than of the home-grown Block H.

The rest of the neighborhood, however, continued to lose heavily. Night-herd riding had become a standard practice. Men rode the range in armed patrols, and the Cattleman's Association had offered rewards and non-prosecution was promised for any member of the rustling gang who double-crossed his fellows and told what he knew. But no man came forward, and a steady stream of thefts was bleeding the range white.

Even the Block H continued to lose stock in spite of the hard riding and readiness to shoot of its foreman and hands. The purchase of outside cattle and loss of his own had combined to bring Peter Galt's pocketbook so close to exhaustion that he was near bankruptcy when he discovered that Dick Harrison once owed Steve's father and therefore owed him twenty thousand dollars. Dick Harrison declared that he had paid the money back, but could not produce the proof. He would have to pay it again.

Steve smiled very grimly.

"He won't pay it again," he drawled, to the excitedly chattering couple. "He can't. He's dead. A fella wearin' these boots I' got on, shot him tonight in that Bar Circle line-rider's shack by Black Ridge."

He continued to smile while they gaped at him.

"Dios mio!" said Miguel, aghast. *"Pero porque?"*

"Why'd I shoot him?" asked Steve sardonically. "I didn't."

He told of the exchange of boots; at first seriously, and then as he saw blank unbelief upon their faces, with an ironic humor. The round, moon-like face of Juana quivered with her distress. There were droplets of sweat upon her face from the cookery.

"Mi pobre Estebanito," said Juana dolefully when he had finished. "Miguel, 'ee weel go weeth you to thee Border-r."

Steve shrugged and manufactured a smoke.

"I'm not goin' to the Border," he said drily.

"But w'at weel you do? When you 'ave keeled a man——"

"You seem to forget," drawled Steve, "I' just been tellin' you I didn't kill him. I was hopin' y'might throw some light on who did."

Juana shrugged again—and again it gave the effect of a miniature earthquake. She turned unhappily to the fireplace and made coffee; incredibly black, incredibly potent coffee.

"I was thinkin'," said Steve amusedly, "of goin' to see the Sheriff."

Two pairs of round, astonished eyes turned to him in utter amazement and incredulity.

"That's what I said," he agreed. "I'm goin' to see the Sheriff. An' you know it ain't easy to lie to him an' get away with it."

They regarded Steve speculatively. It was hard to believe. But by the time he had spread out his blankets before the fire and called them a bed, they were at least tentatively inclined to think that he might be telling the truth. They were not sure of it, of course. They still felt that the part of wisdom, for Steve, required that he head for the Border without wasting time. But he might, just possibly, be telling the truth.

In the single other room of the small house they discussed the matter at length, at first in voices considerably lowered so that Steve might sleep.

"Ah *pobrecito,"* sighed Juana in her native Spanish, "I remember when he loved the Señorita Lucy. . . ."

"I will ride in the morning," announced Miguel placidly. "Before she has heard of her father's death, so that she will be pleased and generous. I will tell her that he has returned——"

"Burro!" snapped Juana scornfully. "Can you think of nothing better? Of a *seguridad* you will say nothing of her father's killing. But you will say that the *Estebanito* perishes of love for her, and that those who would keep him from her arms prepare to die! That is what a young girl wishes to hear!"

"Si," assented Miguel meditatively. "It is something like the lies I used to tell you—and others, Juana."

Steve slept through the family row which followed. He heard it, of course. It seemed comfortably commonplace to hear them quarreling, and if this one happened merely because of a slip of the tongue into truthfulness, it was even in that matter much like other family quarrels.

When he woke, Miguel had gone off somewhere. Juana, beaming sentimentally upon him, served him *frijoles enchiladas.* And Steve rode forth.

He had waked with a hunch. The scale of rustling going on, according to the story told by Miguel and Juana, was much too big for the scheme he had thought himself on the verge of uncovering at the time he'd had to leave the Block H. Something newer and much more daring and on a vastly larger scale was being used. And Steve had a hunch that required the inspection of a bunch of Block H brands. The chances would be against his finding the Sheriff in town today, anyhow. Dick Harrison would have been found by this time—a hunt for him should have started when his riderless horse reached home—and the Sheriff would be out at the line-rider's shack, looking over the ground. Steve wanted to talk to him quite alone. So he rode quietly off into the hills. At nightfall he would go down into Tres Piños and find the Sheriff and talk to him. Much depended on that. But in the meantime. . . .

Steve rode circumspectly into a completely familiar ravine and began to hunt for cattle. And just at the moment that he found the first Block H brand that looked suspicious, and had uncoiled his lariat to throw the animal for a closer inspection—at just that moment Miguel reined in with a flourish before Lucy Harrison. Lucy was rather pale and badly worried. Her father had ridden out the night before and had not returned. And his horse had come in during the small hours, its saddle empty. Bar Circle men were hunting now, but Lucy was wretched. Her father might, of course, have only a sprained ankle or no injury at all. But it might be serious and she waited anxiously. . . .

Miguel doffed his hat with a magnificent gesture. Lucy looked at him uneasily, her thoughts upon her father. And Miguel waved his hands gracefully and said:

"*Señorita*, the *Señor* Steve 'ee 'ave returned. 'Ee say that soon 'ee come to tek you een hees arms. An' already 'ee begin to kill 'oo would keep heem from your side."

He waited, beaming, for a reward. And Lucy Harrison stared at him blankly; bewildered, amazed, and altogether doubtful what the extraordinary message meant. And then a little knot of men came riding soberly up to the ranch house gate. Most of them tried not to look at Lucy. They bunched themselves awkwardly to hide a burden among them. But one came reluctantly toward her.

So that Lucy learned of the murder of her father immediately after a message saying that Steve was killing everybody who would try to keep him from her side.

CHAPTER IV

STEVE rode among the hills. And up in the maze of cliffs and valleys he found an amazing number of cattle. In the old days, such cattle as grazed here had been strays. They would show an extraordinary conglomeration of brands, to be sure. A clump of—say—a dozen herd in some little dead-end cañon, browsing peacefully with all men forgot, might be driven out into more open spaces and found to contain cows of independent tendencies from four or five different ranches, with a bull of a fifth or sixth. The hills bordered the normal range of several owners, and it was not extraordinary for a steer to find itself tangled in the lower ravines and placidly forage its way deeper into the hills instead of back out to the open grazing land. And yearling bulls, unable to cope with the older and battle-wise males of the herds, would sometimes creep away to solitude to let their wounds heal after combat, and find themselves welcomed by admiring cows who—after the fashion of cows the world over—had followed seemingly more succulent vistas into the hills and found their happiness alloyed only by the lack of such family life as subsists among range-cattle. Which lack the yearling bulls supplied, making the hills a place for bovine idylls.

But there had been a fairly definite limit to the number of such strays. In a square mile, perhaps, there might be one clump of half a dozen head, and in three miles more, nothing larger than a jack-rabbit. Then another knot of more than half-wild cattle, and then more empty space.

Now, however, there were cattle everywhere. There had been two main objections to the use of the hills for grazing besides the difficulty of handling cattle in them. There was the danger of rustlers, and the loss of calves from cougars—of sickly ones from coyotes, perhaps. The rustlers in the old days had been mostly amateurs. Nesters and homesteaders, mainly, who hunted strays in the hills for beef. Losses from such causes had seemed great. But by comparison with the steady drain upon the ranches now, they were neglibible. So the hills were full.

There was no cañon however small, provided only that it offered grazing, which did not hold cattle. And the hills were so tumbled, and boundaries so obscure, that the mixture of brands in grazing was only a little less pronounced now that there were hundreds of

head where before there had been dozens. To ride ten miles was to read ten brands, all local, and a clump of fifty head was extraordinary if it did not show cattle from at least three ranches.

Steve knew the ground. Knowing it, he knew where the grazing was best, and therefore where he should find cattle. He found them. And while he moved with a certain discretion—not wanting to be sighted unless it was necessary—he did not feel furtive and did not act that way. Especially after the first hour's hunting when he saw six Block H cattle among a larger number of other brands. Two of the Block H showed Injun Head brand, vented, and Block H branded after. Of the rest of the half-dozen, one showed Block H plain on a yearling steer, one Lazy Eight vented for Block H brand, and one cow which had been branded Double Wheel, to be changed to Block H after purchase. The last had been unskillfully vented ,and Steve could not be sure, but it looked like a Skullbone.

Steve inspected these brands very carefully indeed. He saw them only in glimpses, of course. But after the inspection of the first animal, some distance back, which he'd roped and thrown for careful inspection, he knew just what to look for. And during a long morning's ride he stored away observations which made him look at once grimly amused and rather bitterly ashamed.

"I rec'n," he said hardly, to Duke, "I rec'n Uncle Peter ain't goin' to fuss very much over droppin' all claims on Dick Harrison when he hears what I' got to say about his cattle."

He had avoided thinking about Dick Harrison, as far as he could. Lucy's father had been kind to him when all the rest of the world was not. And if, at the end, he'd come to believe like the rest of the world—well—Steve had matured while he'd been away from home. And even in warning Steve never to dare speak to Lucy again he'd been as decent as a man could be—believing what he did.

Steve held no grudge. At noontime he even went to the little cañon in which he'd built himself a cabin, years before. He dismounted and smoked meditatively while Duke drank from the spring and cropped delicately at the forage nearby. And Steve realized the meaning of Dick Harrison's death to Lucy.

She'd own the Bar Circle, and that ranch like all the rest was being bled white by the rustling now going on. A girl, she couldn't hope to cope with the situation. If her father had been unable to defend his herds, surely she would be helpless.

"An' I'm the black sheep of the Galt family," said Steve, smiling

without mirth. "Uncle Peter an' Swain told the world I was a rustler, never mindin' the disgrace. An' then he an' Swain pulled this trick! So I got to show somebody else up as a black sheep or else Lucy'll lose everything she's got. I wish I knew who killed Dick Harrison!"

The only clues he had were the boots on his feet, which were new, and the spotted legs of a pinto pony, photographed indelibly on his brain.

"Not much chance of pickin' him outa a crowd," said Steve grimly. "He wasn't robbin', an' he was scared to death. I'm goin' to talk to the Sheriff about that. He might have a idea."

His suspicions of Swain did not exactly hold water. So he painstakingly tried to keep an open mind, though already he knew enough to make most men jump to conclusions.

But the rest of the range was not keeping an open mind. It had been very near to sunrise when Dick Harrison's body was brought home by men who'd started hunting for him when his horse came back riderless. They'd found him in the line-rider's shack at the first gray streaks of dawn, looking there because he might have gone into it for shelter from the rain, if dismounted. They'd found him with a bullet in his heart and another in his shoulder. These were from the front. Four others had been pumped hysterically into his back. They'd found fresh boot tracks on the clay floor of the shack. And the rain had wiped out the trail of horses. There was no sign whatever that anybody had been in the shack except Dick Harrison and the man who'd murdered him.

When they rode reluctantly up to the Bar Circle with their burden, they found Lucy puzzled and made uneasy by what Miguel had told her.

"Pero si," said Miguel grandly. " 'Ee say to tell the *Señorita* Lucy that 'ee 'ave returned an' soon 'ee come to tek you een hees arms. An' that already 'ee begin to keel those 'oo would keep heem from your side."

He flourished his hat and waited hopefully for the largesse due for so magnificent a declaration. Juana had liked just such bloodthirsty phrasings in days gone by, and so had other damsels of flashing eyes and entirely primitive instincts.

But the knot of arriving horsemen stopped. One of their number came forward awkwardly. It was Jud Williams, the Bar Circle foreman.

"Miss Lucy," he said desperately, "we—uh—we found y'pa. But —uh—it's right bad news, ma'm. He's—uh—dead, ma'm."

Lucy turned shocked, incredulous eyes upon him. Miguel turned a sudden, pasty, dust-color. He reined his raw-boned horse about to bolt in panic. Jud Williams suddenly snapped:

"Hol' on theah! Stay wheah y'are!"

His eyes flamed in rage born of sudden suspicion.

"You, Miguel!" he said fiercely, "you know somethin' about this! Else y'wouldn't ha' tried to bolt! What' you know about the killin' of Mistuh Harrison?"

Lucy gasped. Her hand went to her throat.

"My father—killed?" she demanded hoarsely. "Killed?"

"Six bullets in him, four in his back!" snapped Jud savagely. "An' this Miguel heah, he knows somethin'! Look at his face!"

Miguel did not look innocent. From dust-color, his complexion had changed to a greenish hue. He had not expected the man of whose death Steve had told him, to be found so soon.

"*Por Dios,*" he swore, babbling, "I know notheeng, *señor!* Notheeng! *Pero el Señor Esteban Galt me di*——"

"He tol' yuh what?" raged Jud. "Talk, damn yuh! Quick!"

"He tol' me," panted Miguel, terrified, "that the *Señor* Harreeson was dead. That is all, *señor!*"

And Lucy turned a chalk-white face toward him. She said in a queer, shocked whisper.

"And—Steve told you to tell me he—had already begun to kill everybody who—everybody who——"

She could say no more. Her eyes were terrible in their anguish. And Jud Williams saw them and he swore frightful oaths at Miguel, despite the fact that Lucy could hear him. He had liked Dick Harrison. All men did. So he croaked horrible curses the while he drove Miguel fiercely to the others and made him repeat over the dead body of Dick Harrison, the message he had given as from Steve.

The news had reached even Tres Piños by the time Steve, leaving the collapsing walls of the cabin he had built, mounted to ride through the hills again. He had not much real hope of learning more. Hell Sink, for example, had been the romantic object of his youthful search. Such a legend, of an outlaw's hangout which no lawman had ever entered, was the sort of thing to appeal to a very young man or a boy. Steve had hunted for it with fine romantic faith. Now he remembered the search, but assuredly he did not consciously continue it. His motive in going through the hills was more nearly to kill time until sunset, when he would go down to Tres Piños. Hell Sink was not in his mind at all.

Perhaps that was why he found it.

He was, presently, in a place of raw red cliffs. It happened to be a part of that inextricably tangled country in which the Block H owned grazing rights, a maze of dry water-courses and minor ravines, of freakish hill formations and unmapable contours.

"Let's see," he drawled. "Big Valley's over thataway somewhere. Ought to be some cattle in Big Valley, sure!"

He picked a way painstakingly over a tortuous and entirely impracticable route. He took some pains not to be sighted as he rode, but not so much that he would be conspicuous. The Block H ran a good many cattle in here and there were riders moving about upon their lawful occasions. It took Steve half an hour and more to get to where he could look down into Big Valley. There he rested, looking down upon placidly grazing clumps of bovine contentment.

"It's right plain," he meditated, watching, "just how 'tis that Uncle Peter can lose so many cattle an' still be able to buy stock an' keep his herds."

The cattle, far below him, seemed to waver in the heat-waves that arose from the valley. It was about half-past two in the afternoon. A single rider was cutting out a bunch of steers, maybe twenty. He got them quite neatly out of the main herd and edged them easily toward the valley wall. They vanished into it, and Steve rubbed his eyes. Then he saw that there was a narrow slit in the sheer cliff there and that the cattle had gone into it.

"In Big Valley!" said Steve, startled. "Swain was the first one that kinda insisted on grazin' cattle in here. But he didn't advertise that little crack in the wall! Folks don't drive cattle places where there ain't room for them to go. I got me an idea I'm goin' to look!"

He squinted keenly all about him and retraced the way by which he had reached this spot. Then for an hour and more he was busy, abstractedly taking the necessary precautions against being silhouetted against the skyline. At the end of something over an hour he began to climb on foot while Duke watched interestedly from below.

When he raised his head above the last rim of rocks and could look over the edge, he was gazing down into a hole in the ground. Nothing more and nothing less than a hole of huge size and whose existence he would never have suspected but for the accident of seeing cattle driven into its entrance. There was fully twenty acres of ground abruptly sunk down below the peaks and pinnacles of

rock which surrounded it. And Steve could see some green grass and a few stunted bushes—which was unimportant—but he could also see the roof of a building of some size which had no business whatever up here in the hills.

This must be, of course, Hell Sink. It was a sink-hole, a place where in past ages a vast natural cavern had existed, the roof of which had caved in perhaps ten thousand years before. Perhaps it had been a cavern worn out by percolating water, like the caverns in the East. Perhaps it had been part of the roof above an underground river, such as elsewhere has made sink-holes of even larger size in irregular lines for sometimes hundreds of miles.

He crawled cautiously forward to gaze more definitely into it. There was only bare rock up here. It was hot beneath his body and it scorched his hands. He came to a spot where wind-eroded stone reared up fantastically in a small cone on the side nearest him, and then fell away sheer into the depression beyond.

Steve reached a spot where he could see a good half of the floor of the Sink. Not less than two hundred head of cattle grazed restlessly at long-since-grazed-over ground. A man came into view and they faced him furiously, bunching as only newly branded cattle will, for defense.

Steve was in the act of wriggling forward to get a still better view when something smashed unpleasantly on the rocks not two feet from his head. It went whining off into space. Then there were the multitudinous echoes of a shot.

Steve's plans changed instantly. He was looking for the source of the shot as he dropped down toward the waiting Duke. His gun was out and he was ready to swap lead, but now much more anxious to get away with his information. This was a good deal more important than his discovery about the brands—though that was important enough!

He saw nothing but raw red earth and the variegated rocks of the pointed hills, but another bullet kicked up earth about his feet as he ran toward Duke, a third and fourth and fifth slithered through the air about him. He heard yells in the distance, and the clattering of horses' hoofs. . . .

Steve dived into a water-shedding gully and went recklessly down it in the canny readiness to duck which characterizes a man who has really done his share of gun-fighting.

"I gotta hunch," he drawled to Duke, "that I just saw Hell Sink, that folks talk about an' nobody ever found. 'Twas a high-power

rifle shootin' at me then, Duke. Somebody was watchin' to see that nobody peeked like we were doin'."

He came out of the gully and Duke reeled, stumbled, and recovered himself miraculously.

"Ain't so familar around here," observed Steve coolly, sending Duke down again; down a suicidal incline amid a rattling of small stones and minor landslides of dust and pebbles. "We'd better get in territory I know better. We came down there quicker than we went up! My private hangout's over thisaway, Duke. . . ."

He whirled around a column of rock and went streaking for the edge of a huge, flat-topped mesa. A clattering uproar suddenly set up somewhere and came rushing for him. From the sound of it, there must be at least half a dozen horsemen trailing him, and they would be armed with rifles as against Steve's sixguns. That, in itself, was an excellent reason for ducking. Two hundred yards is a good long range for accurate shooting with a sixgun. Four hundred is past all hope of accuracy. The men after Steve could pot him from a distance at which his forty-fives would be useless.

"An' I got too much hell-raisin' to do," he observed coolly, finishing the thought aloud, "to go gettin' myself plugged needless. It looks like nobody else even thought about lookin' at those brands."

He raced onward. Ten minutes. The sound of pursuit was close behind. Fifteen. Twenty. The men who followed were straining every nerve. Steve rode with that cool recklessness which is high art, but the men behind him knew the ground. That they did not gain much on him was clear. He heard no yell of men who have sighted their quarry, nor the gun-crackings inseparable from even the most distant view of a hunted man.

But he did not seem to gain any on them, either. Once, indeed, he swung sharply into a steep-sided opening and had raced a full hundred yards up its length before he saw the end-wall facing him. It was a dead-end cañon in miniature, and he had to rein Duke swiftly about and plunge back to resume his original line of flight, having lost two hundred yards by the maneuver.

The silence of his pursuers was a bad omen in another way. They were riding hard. But they wasted no breath in yelling. They were after him on business—and they were using their ears to tell them which way he went. Which told Steve plainly that there was no chance for trickery here. To pop in a hole and hide would do no good. They'd hear Duke's hoof-beats stop. It didn't look like Steve had much chance to get away. But he had to try, of course.

He made sure his guns were ready and rode coolly and very swiftly on. A gully opened here, and another there. Tall, columnar cliffs loomed on one hand, and a fan-shaped slide of reddish detritus on the other. A larger valley ahead. A wide valley. He couldn't be out of sight or rifle-range before his pursuers came in sight, and a lucky rifle-shot would dismount him, and he could then be finished off at leisure.

He pounded on grimly, and simultaneously saw someone riding hard before him and a narrow, winding defile to his left. The man ahead rode a big bay horse and there was a rifle-holster on his saddle.

The picture in Steve's mind had been of himself trying to get across that huge open space with rifles peppering at him from behind and at rest. Now he envisioned that other rider, warned by yells and rifle-shots, dismounting to shoot him cold-bloodedly out of his saddle as an act of routine cooperation with his fellows.

The defile to Steve's left looked bad, but it still looked better than the open valley plus rifle-fire from ahead and behind together. Steve swung left and Duke plunged into the constricted way. The echoes of his hoof-beats rose to thunderous volume. But echoes of that sort would be confusing to the ears of the pursuing men. Steve bored on—and the defile twisted once and came to a dead end.

Duke stopped, breathing easily. Steve muttered, "*Stan' still!*" and swung to the ground and went racing back to the bend. He reached it with both sixguns out and ready. When scores of square miles of tumbled ground are in question, no one man knows the wanderings of every small ravine. Steve's pursuers might come charging in here, not aware that Steve was trapped. And two sixguns, opening fire at short range without warning, might win such a crippling of the party that with a rifle to be taken from a dead man's saddle, Steve might yet win through.

He found a waist-high boulder, past which he could see unseen. He dropped down beside it, watching with narrowed eyes the opening of the defile.

Duke, around the bend, stirred delicately and was still. The racing clatter which was the following band swept up to the opening of the defile. A horse raced past, neck outstretched, using that extraordinary gait of a horse hard-pressed on uneven rocky ground. Two more. Another. Yet three more. The riders were heavily armed and every man had some weapon ready, but otherwise they appeared in nowise unlike average cow hands. Block H men, most likely.

A last rider flashed past the opening, spurring savagely.

Steve smiled grimly. They'd go out into the valley and find he'd vanished. Then they'd come back and dive in here. Not hearing hoof-beats, they'd think he'd gotten a good lead, maybe, and drive ahead recklessly to try to catch up. . . .

But there was a sudden crackle of shots.

Steve stared. The crackling rose to a roar. He went running out to the mouth of the narrow way. He reached the wider gully. He went out into it, both guns still handy. And down in the middle of the valley he saw the shooting—and its end.

The man who had caused him to swerve aside, the lone rider with the rifle and the bay horse—that man was racing for the lower end of the valley. The pack that had chased Steve was after him. Their guns gave off sudden, blossoming little puffs of smoke. Bent low, he fired back at the fan-shaped band of pursuers.

As Steve caught sight of him, he reeled in his saddle. He had been hit. He suddenly collapsed and went rolling to the ground. His horse plunged on two dozen yards and stopped, but then it came anxiously back to its master and nosed urgently at the still figure. That figure seemed to try to pull itself upright by the dangling mane of the horse. It got halfway up——

Wolfish riders swooped down. There were more shots—and then only a swaying struggle as men strove to subdue a horse which fought fiercely against strange hands on its bridle.

The struggle ended. And on foot, a mile and more away, Steve raged impotently alike against those who had committed the murder he had just witnessed, and the fate which had caused him to hide from this unknown man who had died in his stead instead —as would surely have been the case had Steve ridden on—instead of fighting by his side.

CHAPTER V

FAR away, down in the valley, there was a small commotion among the bunched knot of men and horses. The confusion ceased, and they started off again as a small cavalcade. Now, though, there was a led horse in their midst—a big bay. The horse bore a burden, which had been its master.

The cavalcade did not come back toward Steve. It headed off

in a direction which was evidently a short cut to the neighborhood of Hell Sink.

Steve watched it go, his guns held in an impotently ferocious grip.

"They thought he was me," he told the inattentive hillsides savagely, "an' I thought he was one of them! If I'd known, the two of us coulda done some damage. . . ."

He watched the moving line of distant men and horses. Hopelessly out of sixgun range. Beyond anything like accurate rifle range, too.

"That's two men dead since I got back here las' night," he added coldly. "I could be blamed for Dick Harrison easy. An' these fellas are goin' to find out, when they get back to the fella who first spied me an' shot at me, that I rode a black horse instead of a bay. So they'll know they killed the wrong man an' maybe I'll get the blame for him too—whoever he was."

He stood still frowning for what seemed minutes. He was tempted to try to head off the men who a little while since had chased him, and who had murdered another man in cold blood before his eyes. But even aside from the suicidal aspect of the idea, he now knew two things which needed to be known by the world at large. This dead man would be avenged when those things were known, but if Steve were killed there might be other men murdered just for lack of that knowledge.

"An' after I've told the Sheriff what I know," he said savagely as Duke picked his way into the valley which now was safe to travel in, I'm goin' to borrow a rifle an' come ridin' back up here. I already know why Swain an' his gang don't like visitors, but the welcome they hand out don't strike my fancy. I kinda think I'm goin' to hit it off with that detective fella the Sheriff wrote me about. The Sheriff said he was a good man. I'm thinkin' that a coupla good men can raise plenty hell in these hills."

It did not occur to him that the detective might be the man who had just died in his stead. Steve was just a little too angry to reason clearly. He was much too angry to ride out of the hills with the same circumspection he had used when riding in. He had guessed that his would-be murderers would presently learn that they had killed the wrong man. Then, of course, they would come hunting even more desperately than before for the man who knew too much of their affairs—who knew of the location of Hell Sink.

Nevertheless, the calvacade taking the wrong man's body back to Hell Sink had a fairly long way to go, and it did not hurry. Steve

had a long start before the murderers learned of their error. He had an even longer start before desperately searching men saw him, very far away. And then there was much tortuous, tumbled ground between. That they opened up with riffles was a sort of hopeless gamble. The range was much too great.

Steve knew he was sighted only when he heard a faint, thin *"Pop!"* a long distance away, and more than a second afterward heard the fretful whine of a bullet that passed him and splashed itself on a rock a good hundred yards beyond.

He reined in and turned his head. He searched with hot eyes for the distant sharp-shooter. He saw a dozen men. He saw the flashes of their weapons and later heard the faint, thin sound of the explosions, and later still the whinings of many bullets.

"Tryin' to get a bullet into you, Duke, so I'll be on foot an' they can kill me real comfortable. I don't care about runnin' a risk for myself, but you' different—an' we got news to spread. Shake a hoof! An' if they get close, we'll puncture a few of 'em."

He rode openly, from then on. He even swaggered a little in the saddle. Twice again, as he rode on, he heard thin little whining noises with faint popping sounds preceding and following them. Once a slug of lead passed less than two feet above his head. But it was sheer accident and he knew it. He let it be seen that he was heading for one certain exit from the hills and did not deviate in the slightest from the natural route. But his pursuers had only those two chances to shoot at him from impossible distances, and no real possibility of overtaking him at all.

"Brand-blottin' with an alibi," he drawled, watching like a hawk as he made his necessarily winding way toward the open range again, while shadows deepened in the valley bottoms and the sky grew insensibly darker overhead. "A regular ranch house back in Hell Sink. Block H man ridin' herd right in front of the door. Fellas shootin' at other fellas with Winchesters, an' trailin' 'em with malice aforethought an' after attended to. I'd right much admire to get hold of one of those fellas that were usin' their rifles so free! Somethin' tells me he'd talk.

"I rec'n," said Steve, "the Sheriff's got a coupla warrants for me. We'll go in an' let him serve 'em. I wouldn't feel like a black sheep unless I got in jail now an then. I'm wonderin' what he'll do when I talk to him?"

Then Steve narrowed his eyes and looked keenly at a distant speck. And suddenly he had swerved Duke about and Duke was racing at breakneck speed toward that speck.

When Steve reined up in a cloud of alkali dust that rolled and swirled behind him, for once there was neither mockery nor bitterness in his expression. He looked at the pale girl who faced him, and his eyes were much softer than anybody else had seen them for a good many years.

"Howdy, Lucy," he said quietly.

Lucy Harrison had heard the plunging hoofs. She had turned her head, and she had very plainly recognized Steve. At the first glimpse she gathered up her reins. Then she dropped them. Now she sat quietly, her face pale and her eyes showing that she had wept much since sunrise.

Now it was sunset, and the dying light that touched upon her was a ruddy gold. It glinted in her hair and upon the smooth and silky coat of her horse. She wore mannish chaps and spurs, the hide chaps being bravely ornamented with silver studs. The saddle, too, was the work of a craftsman who had put love into the task of making it.

He took off his hat, and the thinning red light beat upon his face. She could read it plainly. It was young, and the lips were more firmly set than a young man often manages, and there was ordinarily a cool detachment in his look.

She sat in judgement upon Steve, though he did not know it. She had been told he was her father's murderer, and he did not even suspect it. As he looked at her a queer and crooked smile came upon his lips. He'd thought about her, of course, while he'd been away. At first because he'd loved her and it hurt to know what she must believe of him. Then because she'd been the only person beside the Sheriff ever to like or really trust him after his father's death. And then—and this had been the more permanent reason for thinking often of her—then he'd thought of her as a man might think of someone like a younger sister, but much more dear than a sister could be. And she'd been not exactly an ideal, because ideals are chilly things. She'd been a wholly illogical but extremely potent reason for keeping out of such entanglements as a young man can get into when he is utterly alone and much embittered.

"Howdy, Lucy."

Then Lucy moistened her lips. She did not smile. She nodded her head and said quietly:

"Steve, did you kill my father?"

Steve straightened a little.

"No, Lucy."

Her eyes remained fixed on his face.

"Your boots—left tracks—on the floor where he was found."

The crooked, mirthles smile on Steve's face widened. He began to see—many things.

"Yes, Lucy. I rec'n they did." He said it gently. He added, "You got that from Miguel? I told him."

"He told me," said Lucy.

Steve shrugged, but the light went out of his eyes.

"That tale I told him," he said in a fine attempt at a humorous detachment, "it happens t'be true, but it ain't what you'd call convincin', is it?"

She still had one hand on the little revolver in her belt.

"I don't know what tale you told him. But he gave me a message from you."

"I sent you no message, Lucy," said Steve harshly. "Your pa told me not to speak to you because he'd come gunnin' if I did. An' when I came back I intended to speak to you, heah! But I was aimin' to speak to him first an' let him stop me if he could!"

Lucy's hand stirred, on the gun-butt.

"He said," she said quietly, "that you sent me word that you had already begun to kill those who would stand between us, and that you—you would come and——Carry me off, I suppose, is the politest way of putting it."

"I didn't send you any message a-tall," he drawled. "But I'll hardly expect you to believe it. I came back because——"

"What?"

Steve started to speak and checked himself. Then he said deliberately:

"I got kinda homesick."

"You lie," said Lucy very quietly indeed.

The old mocking light came back into Steve's eyes. He even smiled faintly. Then he spread out his hands, and shrugged, and tried to grin at her. But the grin was not a success.

"Then," he drawled, "hadn't you better pull that gun you've got your hand on? Why don't you shoot me? Gawd knows I won't mind!"

The last was bitterness, pure and simple. He'd remembered Lucy as a girl, and he'd loved that girl. But she was a woman now, and —well—it is not pleasant for a man to see his dreams made flesh and be in Steve's position.

"Ain't I the ungratefullest black sheep a low-down family ever turned out?" he asked in sardonic amusement. "Your pa was about

the best friend I had, Lucy. An' I came back, an' my boots are proof I killed him. Go ahead, Lucy! Aim that gun my way an' let her go. I sure won't stop you."

But Lucy took her hand away from the gun-butt. She said more quietly still:

"The Sheriff told me you were coming back. He said he wrote you."

Steve stiffened.

"Shucks——" he began easily.

Lucy moved closer. She laid her hand on his arm.

"Be quiet, Steve. I—I want to tell you some things. Miguel came to me this morning and said you'd sent him with that message. I—I believed him for a moment because—I'd asked him for news of you before. And I—hadn't had time to think it over before—they rode up with—my father." She was deathly white, but her voice did not falter. "I was stunned then, and I—think I said you'd killed him. I'm not sure. I was—beside myself for a little while, Steve. Anyhow, the boys on the ranch made Miguel repeat the message he'd given me. Then they made him tell all he knew. He told about—your boots. And all the hands went looking for you. They'd have killed you if they'd found you."

Steve stroked Duke's neck.

"Yeah," he said detachedly. "I see now. Under the circumstances, y'can't blame 'em for feelin' that way."

"But I—" Lucy hesitated, and then she said soberly: "I know you didn't kill my father. I don't know why I'm sure. But if you came back because the Sheriff told you about your uncle trying to collect that old debt again——"

Steve shook his head impatiently.

"I ain't goin' to let him disgrace my pa that way!"

"So I'm telling you all I know." Lucy managed to summon a smile. "I—came out to ride by myself so I could think. The boys at the ranch believe you did kill my father. Even if I couldn't keep them from killing you if they saw you. But——"

Steve looked up.

"I never believed the things they said about you," said Lucy. She looked pale, and grief-stricken, and yet she made her voice quite steady. "You see, Steve, I—loved you before you went away. And now you've come back, I—I want the man who killed my father punished, and I—want you cleared."

Steve nodded once more. For a moment there was only the un-

certain small noise the horses made, moving restlessly while their riders talked.

"I'll 'tend to it somehow," said Steve soberly. "Anyhow, I'll try. I've got a kind of idea. Did you know your pa was goin' to that shack?"

"N-no. ... He got a note of some sort and went out looking angry. I don't know what the note said or who sent it."

Steve nodded to himself.

"Yeah. . . . I'm ridin' in to see the Sheriff, Lucy. Maybe with him helpin' I can do some business. There was another man killed today, up Hell Sink way. By Big Valley. They were chasin' me, an' they ran into him. Shot him."

"Who?"

"I don't know. I rec'n," Steve smiled the ghost of a smile, "I rec'n I'll get the blame for him. You an' the Sheriff are the only two people in the world who're likely to take my word for anything a-tall."

"I believe in you," said Lucy quietly. "I don't know why. But I take your word, Steve. For anything."

And presently Steve smiled again, rather wryly, and touched Lucy's hand for just a moment, and silently turned Duke about and rode away.

Steve was oddly content as he went on. Far, far away. there were confused small twinkles which could not ever be definitely sighted, but which were nevertheless the lights of Tres Piños. A man could not ever say, "There they are!" of those fugitive yellow flickerings. He could merely realize that he had just seen the tiniest possible pinpoint of light for the briefest possible instant. But they were a guide.

"Didn't even ask how it happened I had on these boots," he told Duke as that animal loped through the darknes toward town. "Didn't ask a thing! Lordy! When a woman trusts a man——"

There was a peculiar still peacefulness in his heart.

Lucy knew, assuredly. She rode homeward with an extraordinary mixture of emotions filling her mind. Her father was dead and yet unburied. He had, of course, as her father, been her protector. And what was rarer, he had been her friend too. She knew that she had been the one person on earth about whom he worried and for whom he genuinely cared.

It was a long time after the parting when the houses of Tres Piños took shape in Steve's eyes. He saw the two-story jail. The big water tank. Dimmer, lower shapes which were other buildings.

He reined in and strained his eyes, refreshing his memory, and then turning to Duke about to that small arroyo along which the willows grew hopefully. He dismounted at the stream from the water hole which had made the settlement possible.

Somehow, he could not quite feel that any danger could remain in the world for him, after the unsaid things in his talk with Lucy. But in entering the town he used all due caution. It was full of men who believed that he had killed Lucy's father, and their belief was based on what must seem quite reasonable grounds.

The jail was a little distance beyond, the single two-story structure of the town. Steve saw it looming up above the rest of the town's edifices. A lamp glowed in the window which would be the Sheriff's office. Steve, clinging to the shadows, made his way toward it. There were few figures visible. Most men were at home, in the adobe shacks that Steve was leaving behind, or else gathered where conviviality reigned. A row of drooping, dusty cow ponies drowsed at the hitching-rail before the Palace.

Steve had to pass the dance-hall. He heard a movement ahead of him. He thought he heard a whisper. His hand dropped to his hip and his eyes grew narrow and alert. A voice said:

"Yu' . . .!"

There was a movement, and Steve was bent low and plunging forward when the flash of a gun came almost in his face. A bullet ripped the wide brim of his Stetson, and then his first shot blended with the other to wake a million echoes.

The shot came around the corner of the alley between the dance-hall and a closed and darkened store. Steve rounded that corner with both guns going. One man plunged into obscurity and was lost. Another lay very still close against a flimsy, boarded wall.

Steve stopped. There was a curious dead silence in the air. It was seconds before he realized that the music in the Palace had broken off in the middle of a bar, that the shrill laughter and nasal singing had stopped as if a hand had been laid across the mouths of those within.

He painstakingly reloaded his guns. The silence held. Then there was a furtive sound and he looked up at a man's head timorously peering from a window.

"Howdy," said Steve dryly.

"Shootin' finished?"

"I reckon so," said Steve. He shoved home his last shell and holstered his weapons.

A door opened suddenly and a flood of light poured out into the

narrow alleyway. Men came out, at first hesitantly, then boldly. Steve remained in shadow, smiling ironically.

"What was the matter?"

"I'm wonderin' mysell," said Steve dryly. "Somebody shot at me. Put a hole in my hat. So I shot back. There's one fella."

He watched while a man bent over.

"Dead enough."

The man struck a match. The yellow glow shone oddly on the boarded walls of dance-hall and store, on the dried-up, dusty litter in the alleyway, upon the crumpled figure.

The man with the match straightened up.

"By Gawd, it's Hamby!"

Steve tilted his hat back a little.

"Yeah?" he drawled. "Hamby?"

There was a murmur inside the dance hall. "*Hamby. . . . Somebody's killed Hamby. . . .*" The murmur rose to a buzzing, an unformed and uneasy humming sound which was potentially dangerous.

The man with the matches struck another one.

"Shot in the back, too," he said grimly. "Three—four times."

More men came out, thrusting themselves through a crowd bunched just inside the door.

"Who shot Hamby?" roared the first. Steve recognized him. Barrow, of the Crazy Fork. "Who shot Hamby?"

"This fella heah."

"Me," said Steve evenly. "Somebody shot a hole in my hat an' he wasn't playin' any. So I let him have it."

"You, huh?" Barrow squinted to see him in the dimness. "You." He stopped short, astounded. Then he said grimly: "I reckon I know you! Steve Galt, ain't yuh?"

Steve shrugged. His hands were on his two guns.

"Yeah. Steve Galt," he said dryly. "The black sheep driftin' back to the old home range. I shot Hamby like I'd shoot anybody else that started pluggin' at me without warnin'."

"O' course," rumbled Barrow savagely, "y' didn't know that he was hired by the Cattleman's Association to look into rustlin' around heah! Of course not! Y' didn't think he might be crampin' yuh style!" He swore suddenly. Then: "Listen t' me, Steve Galt! Maybe you' quick with y' guns! I see y' got yuh hands on 'em. But theah's too many guns around heah for you to get away! Stick up y' han's!"

"An' get lynched?" drawled Steve. He made no discernible move-

ment, but the light from the window glittered on his drawn weapons. "With kind regards an' all that, you an' yours can go plumb to hell!"

His guns wavered from side to side, hypnotically. Cramped as the alleyway was, but so many men could face him and there was light enough for him to see the slightest movement toward a weapon. There was even light enough to show the frozen, ironic smile upon his face.

"I'll just back gently out of here," he began.

A little distance away from the jail, there sounded metallic clickings and thumps. Someone was unlocking and unbarring the massive jail door.

Barrow raised his voice in a roar.

"Get out the front door!" he roared. "It's Steve Galt, killed Hamby!"

Another growling roar inside the dance-hall answered him. It was made up of many voices. There was a pounding of feet, and Steve was facing the tense group in the alleyway with sure knowledge that the waver of his eyes from them would bring guns out, and equally sure knowledge that seconds only lay between him and a withering volley from behind.

His guns spat flame, suddenly. And instead of retreating he was leaping forward. He brought down one barrel on a flinching man's head. The other missed its objective, but crunched on a man's collarbone. And Steve was through.

The bellow of guns was instant and deafening behind him. The pounding of feet in savage pursuit began instantly. And Steve tore around the back of the store, hurdled a mass of packing-boxes, and began to run and dodge for his life.

It was literally that. Tres Piños was full of men. The killing of Dick Harrison was an open topic, and the Bar Circle hands had made no secret of the evidence against Steve. Steve's reputation had been bad enough anyhow. The fact that Dick Harrison had threatened to kill him if he ever spoke to Lucy again, was ancient history. The coincidence of his return and Dick Harrison's immediate murder would have been bad enough, even without Miguel's volunteered damage. But this new, admitted killing. . . .

In seconds the street was a seething turmoil of men hunting savagely for Steve, diving into every space between houses, under houses, even climbing to the flat roofs in search of him.

When shots began to crackle suddenly, every man in town rushed toward the spot. And Steve came out panting, his Stetson awry on

his head and blood running down one leg, and fought his way blindly across the street. Guns were going everywhere, it seemed.

He staggered once, and it seemed that he would fall. But the town was not well lighted save by the gun-flashes. He did not drop. He reeled against a wall, a door opened, he fell into it——

With a roar, the mob streamed toward that opening.

CHAPTER VI

A WAVERING candle gave a flickering light inside the iron-barred cell. The Sheriff licked a bit of sticking-plaster and pressed it firmly to hold a wad of cotton on Steve's temple.

"Ricochets," he observed mildly, "are right funny things. 'Near as I can make out, that there bullet musta hit the jail wall an' bounced back on you. Knocked y' cold. Chances were a coupla million to one it woulda killed yuh."

Steve smiled peculiarly.

"Instead of which," he said dryly, "my guns are gone, I'm in jail with a coupla murder charges hangin' over me, an' there's a mob outside just plain howlin' for a chance to get in here an' lynch me."

The Sheriff inspected his bandages professionally and drew back, satisfied.

"They ain't howlin' so much now," he said placidly. "See if y' strong enough to walk. Y' ought to be. I think they sent a coupla fellas out to the Bar Circle for some dynamite to blow open the jail with. Dick Harrison had some, blastin' ditches."

Steve stood up and limped across the cell and back.

"This limp," he explained, "ain't my leg. That's just scratched. But the heel of my boot got shot off."

"Right warm shootin'," conceded the Sheriff.

Steve sat down on the cot again and rolled a cigarette.

"I've sure got a head!" he commented. "How long before they get that dynamite?"

"Half an hour, maybe," said the Sheriff. "They started a good while ago."

"I rec'n that much time'll do," said Steve soberly. "Listen here! I've found out the rustling scheme an' where it's carried out. Hell Sink's the place.'

"Hamby was lookin' for that place today," said the Sheriff, mildly. "He's been talkin' around an' he heard of it."

"You get to it——" Steve explained in detail just in what part of Big Valley the narrow slid of the entrance to Hell Sink was to be found. The Sheriff nodded in admiration.

"I' been by it a dozen times," he admitted, "an' never would ha' thought it."

"An' the rustling scheme . . . Uncle Peter's got a lot of bought cattle."

"Yep," said the Sheriff. "He borrowed the money from the bank to buy 'em with."

"He didn't need to," said Steve grimly. "Look here! The tough part of rustlin' is sellin' the stuff you steal. It's hard to sell ten or twenty head of cattle, but it ain't near so hard to sell a coupla hundred. The big job in rustlin' is gettin' enough cattle together to make it worth while stealin' 'em. Hell Sink takes care o' that. They can put plenty cattle in there!"

"Yeah," agreed the Sheriff. "O' course."

"An' the next toughest part in the sellin' business is brands. Uncle Peter's got him a dam' good trick for that!"

"Y' Uncle Peter ain't a rustler," interposed the Sheriff mildly. "I used to know him. He's a durned fool, an' a —— crank, an' he ain't what you'd call a amiable character, but I got me a right firm notion that he ain't a crook."

"I saw anyways fifty cattle today on the Block H," said Steve grimly, "with blotted brands. How long since y' saw him?"

"Right long," admitted the Sheriff. "Come to think of it, I ain't seen him for better'n a year. He stays pretty close. Rheumatism, ain't it? An' last time I saw him I didn't see him. He just cussed outa a window when I went to the ranch house an' told me to get to hell away."

"If you ain't see him for a year, maybe he's changed. Or maybe y' won't believe me. You talk that way! But—I saw Bar Circle brands changed to Block H, an' folks have been passin' 'em."

"I've seen a lot of blotted brands," said the Sheriff, gently, "an' some right clever ones. But nothin' as clever as that!"

Steve inhaled deeply.

"Time's passin'," he said curtly. "The way Uncle Peter changes a Bar Circle into a Block H is, first, to buy some Double Wheel stock to make good what rustlers have stole from him. Then he lets everybody know about it. An' then he changes some Bar Circle brands into Double Wheel, which ain't difficult. Then he

cancels that Double Wheel an' rebrands Block H, open an' above board. Nobody thinks of lookin' at a canceled brand. They pass the cow as a bought critter."

"Lordy!" said the Sheriff. "An' I never thought o' that!"

"Same way," said Steve briefly, "Lazy C turns into a right good Skullbone. Crazy Forks make Lazy Eights. An a Lightnin' Bolt brand makes a particular neat Injun Head. The ranches Uncle Peter bought cattle from are a good long ways away. All he has to do is figure how to change a neighbor's brand to any brand a-tall. Then he buys some cattle from that other ranch, an' then any cows of—say—Lightnin' Bolt that stray on the Block H range get led gently to where they can be turned into Injun Head stock an' rebranded Block H real honest."

The Sheriff nodded, his eyes quizzical.

"An' none of us ever thought of it!" he marveled. "Somebody's sure clever! But it ain't your Uncle Peter."

"If you think it's me," said Steve grimly, "remember I got less than half an hour to live."

"Huh! Maybe a mite more," said the Sheriff. "Wait a minute."

He fished in his pocket. Steve smoked, and let his eyes wander about the dingy little cell in which what seemed to be his last few minutes was to be spent. Raw stone, very indifferently squared and set in hard concrete. A small iron cot, with a thing bag of straw on it. A window, nearly closed by heavy iron bars. A grille of iron across one end, in which was a door of iron with a massive lock.

The Sheriff was scribbling on a scrap of paper with the stub of a pencil, using his knees as a rest and with the wavering illumination of the candle for light.

"Maybe this ain't fair," he said meditatively, writing, "because you ain't got any choice but to do like I tell yuh. An' the pay ain't high. But this might come in useful."

"What?"

"Bein' my deputy," said the Sheriff, signing his name. He handed over the paper. "Considerin' the circumstances, I thought I'd give you that. It might convince some folks that'd doubt you otherwise."

Steve glanced at the crabbed scrawl.

"*I have appointed Steve Galt a deputy sheriff of this county, with authority to make arrests.*"

"But I'm in jail for murder!" said Steve.

"Hell!" said the Sheriff inelegantly, "you didn't kill Hamby."

He picked up his keys and unlocked the cell door.

"Come on out in the office an' get y' guns. I had 'em bring

Hamby in heah—holdin' a gun to make sure nobody tried to rush past me. He was killed with rifle bullets an' he'd been dead anyways three—four hours. They just kinda provoked you into slingin' some lead, with him layin' theah as y' victim."

He flung the cell door wide.

"I had to have you in a cell for safety. Come on! I'm figurin' that somebody had Hamby, dead, an' didn't want folks huntin' around to find out wheah he was killed. An' it wouldn't take much thinkin' for folks to remember that I'd let you leave the county before, when theah was right much evidence against yuh. Those fellas figured that if you'd got some news about wheah Hell Sink was, an' so on, you'd be tryin' to find me an' pass the word along. So they brought him in to town. If you come along, well an' good. If not,—why—almost anybody they could plug with a lot o' shootin', leavin' two bodies to be found after the shootin' stopped. . . ."

Steve blinked suddenly.

"I rek'n it was Hamby I saw get killed."

"Wheah?" The Sheriff whirled about.

Steve told him.

"Hm . . . That musta been him. He hadda bay horse, all right, an' he was headin' for those parts." The Sheriff nodded. "It all fits in with what I've been tellin' you. They had Hamby, dead. If they laid for you an' plugged yuh, an' ducked prompt, it'd look like you an' Hamby had plugged each other an' a whole lot o' questions wouldn't be asked. Somebody else to take your place as a corpse would help some, but you'd be the best corpse for theah purpose."

He picked up Steve's guns from his desk and handed them over.

"Set down in a chair," he ordered. "Smoke up. We got near half an hour yet. Y' came back because y'got my letter."

"You said," Steve told him grimly, "my Uncle Peter was tryin' to make Dick Harrison pay him money that he'd paid my pa years ago.

The Sheriff beamed. Here in his fly-specked, dusty office, he looked more than ever a mild and inoffensive person. The Sheriff was small and rather lean—Steve towered over him—and his straggling white whiskers and mild blue eyes were deceptively gentle.

"Now," said the Sheriff, "he'll try to make Lucy pay. Y' cousin Oliver, Steve, was courtin' Lucy right hard before that debt business come up."

Steve smiled faintly. The Sheriff eyed him shrewdly.

"Y' see Lucy?"

"I did," said Steve. "She don't believe I killed her pa."

"My brain's buzin'," said the Sheriff. "I was all up in the air till you told me some things. I' heard some right funny things about you, Steve."

Steve told him, curtly, of the exchange of boots a few minutes before he'd found Dick Harrison's dead body. That forced exchange of boots, indeed, was the reason he'd gone into the shack. He told the Sheriff the few identifying marks he had noted about the murderer. He should, Steve thought, be wearing Steve's boots. And he had a pinto pony with spotted legs.

"Y' still wearin' the boots, Steve."

"They don't fit those tracks any more," said Steve dryly. "I carved 'em around the soles a little. The heel track is right much different."

The Sheriff chuckled and unlimbered a huge pipe. He filled it deliberately.

"Now, t' business," he said, briskly. "You' a right lively person, Steve, when y' get started. This heah rustlin' gang, it's right lively, too. Y' gave me a coupla ideas, an I'd like a lot to keep you heah in jail till the smoke blows over. But it ain't safe. So I'm turnin' you loose."

"Thanks," said Steve, in some irony. He looked out of the window. There men visible in the light that glowed from the Palace Dance-hall windows. Watching the jail grimly, lest the Sheriff spirit Steve away.

"I'll get yuh away," the Sheriff chuckled. "No worry about that, Steve. But heah's my pint. Folks are goin' to be chasin' you. Some for killin' Hamby. They' goin' to be real anxious. Some for killin' Dick Harrison. They' goin' to be real anxious, too. But they ones that are goin' to be most anxious of all to catch you an' see y' don't find out any more——"

"Uncle Peter, I rec'n," drawled Steve. "If I could get anybody to listen to me, he'd be in a right nasty mess around now.

"No, not y' Uncle Peter," demurred the Sheriff. "I got an idea he's a lot more innocent than y' think. But—uh—let's say Swain, an' maybe y' cousin Oliver. Now you get busy runnin' away. Then when somebody catches you—arrest 'em!"

Steve looked curiously at the Sheriff. Then he smiled slowly.

"A real bright idea," he drawled. "Real bright."

"Meanwhile I make me a sort of posse. Fellas that I can kinda

trust. Not friends of Swain, we'll say, an'—uh—not too much wrought up about Dick Harrison's killin'. Just folks that want this rustlin' stopped. Most of 'em," added the Sheriff calmly, "are outside waitin' now for a chance to bust in heah an' lynch you. But they' good men. I'll take em over to the Block H. An I'll insist on talkin' to your Uncle Peter. You ain't got any idea how firm I'm goin' to be about insistin' on talkin' to your Uncle Peter, Steve. I think he's about as innocent of rustlin' as a man could be, but I think surprisin' results might come of my insistin' on talkin' to him. Wheah's that money-belt, Steve? The one the fella paid for y' boots?"

"Toolhouse roof," said Steve succinctly. "Close by the Block H ranch house. Flat roof. I chucked it up there."

"Thoughtful," said the Sheriff admiringly. "With that on the premises I can arrest 'most anybody I want to. You an' me, we sure do work together! Well—that's the lay-out. You know what y' have to do. But I do wish you c'd try to see Lucy one more time somehow—most of the Bar Circle boys will be in town anyways, come in for your lynchin'—an' tell her to be careful. Especial, not to go ridin' anywheah by herself. It's right important, Steve."

"I'll tell her," said Steve grimly. "Y' mean you think ——"

Crash! Glass burst in a window of the Sheriffs office. Steve and the Sheriff started up and whirled on the one instant.

CRASH! A gun bellowed deafeningly in the room. With a leap, Steve smashed the lamp, but not before he had seen a splash of gruesome red on the Sheriff's forehead, and had seen the Sheriff's face go queerly blank.

He heard the Sheriff collapse to the floor as he plunged to the window from which the shot had come. Something close to a sob of rage came from Steve as he emptied both guns out the opening, browning all the space he could envision as holding the Sheriff's assassin.

But his eyes were dazzled by the lamplight. On this, the dark side of the jail, he could see nothing. Had it been on the side lighted by the dance-hall lights, he might have made out a target. As it was he fired blindly, and without effect.

He came back, breathing heavily. He reloaded his guns in the pitch darkness which now had fallen. The Sheriff had been sure he could get Steve away. The Sheriff was one of the two friends he had possessed. . . .

A little streaked light came in from the street where men waited for dynamite with which to blow the jail apart. As Steve's eyes

grew accusomed to the fainter light, he made out first the Sheriff's figure, on the floor, and then stray odds and ends of furniture, and then the Sheriff's face, upturned. . . .

Steve bent over it. A dark patch in the forehead, which grew sluggishly larger as he watched. Steve ground his teeth.

"Somebody—somebody," drawled Steve unevenly in the darkness, "is goin' to get killed for this!"

Then he heard yells outside. The jail was completely unlighted now. But the glow from the Palace Dance-hall gave light even in the jail. There was plenty of illumination out in the street for Steve to see a buckboard being driven up in plain view. There were riders behind it, eager and vengeful Bar Circle men, who scattered themselves among the crowd as the buckboard came to a stop in the light.

"Got a case of it," yelled the driver. "Somebody get somethin' to open the box with ——"

He jumped down, surrounded by milling, excited men. The horses quivered uneasily. Cowponies do not like to be driven in harness. These were no exception. One of them plunged and threatened to kick. Men took them hastily out of harness and led them away, leaving the vehicle still standing in the light. Somebody was hunting for a suitably gentle tool with which to open the case of explosive. The mob milled and yapped and babbled. There is a peculiar and unmistakable timbre to the noise a mob makes when it is bent upon mischief. Just that timbre was in the sound that rose from the one street of Tres Piños.

Then an argument more raging than elsewhere broke out in one spot. It rose to a peak and at last one man thrust himself through the ring about him. He cleared a space about himself and shouted to the jail.

"Sheriff! Listen heah! We' goin' to have Steve Galt!. We don't want to hurt you, but we' goin' to get him no mattter how much shootin' theah has to be!"

Silence. A babble came from certain quarters of the crowd, protesting against the parley.

"Y' goin' to give 'im to us?" roared the man. It was Barrow, of the Crazy Fork ranch. "We ain't hidin' who we are! We' askin' for him open an' above-board. You can prosecute us afterward, if y' like, but we' goin' to get Steve Galt! Y' goin' to open that door before we blow it open?"

Steve, listening and watching from the window of the office, smiled a frozen smile. He spoke evenly out into the night.

"The Sheriff got killed jus' now," he drawled. "An' so I don't suppose he aims to give me up."

The mob paused for one second. Just long enough for Steve to add:

"If you-all'll only listen ——"

Then men roared. They seemed to go into one of those crazy rages that only a mob can go into, when for minutes at a time it will mill about aimlessly, bellowing with wrath but achieving nothing until some one person starts a definite action. Then all the rest follow—if the purpose is destruction.

Steve grinned mirthlessly. They wouldn't listen, though if he could talk to them for just three minutes. . . .

Then he saw just what he needed to see. Swain, of the Block H, was snarling orders to half a dozen Block H hands. His men would start the dynamite talk into action. Right now, though—and this was the important thing—no one was within yards of the buckboard.

Steve fumbled quickly about the dark little office. The Sheriff lay motionless, with that ghastly dark splotch in his forehead. The smell of cold stone and masonry, Steve fumbled. . . . The rifle the Sheriff carried on man-hunts!

Steve cuddled the stock against his cheek and sighted carefully. He didn't want to hurt the men outside.

He fired.

CRASH! There was a monstrous eruption of livid flame, in which the buckboard disappeared utterly. A cataclysmic detonation, when it seemed that the world must have come to an end—a cataclysm which had its anticlimax in the consistent tinkling of broken glass from very many shattered windows all over Tres Piños. Dense smoke and blown-about dust filled even the Sheriff's office. Half the lights of the Palace Dance-hall went out, and the rest flickered crazily for seconds. Men were blown off their feet by the wave of air. . . .

Silence fell. And then a raging, blood-curdling roar from the mob. This was no aggregation of hoodlums, but a representative gathering of men who had suffered from rustlers and rustling until law and order seemed inadequate to cope with their needs. The blast of dynamite enraged them because it baffled them, but it did not cow them because they were not there to be frightened.

"Now what?" drawled Steve amusedly into vacancy.

The first answer was a storm of bullets into the windows of the jail. For minutes, Steve could not look out. When he did, he found

no encouragement in the demeanor of the mob. So far from being dazed or dismayed, the mob which had been grimly resolute had now become savagely determined—even ferociously determined.

Steve drew back from the hail of lead. The Sheriff had had some way of getting him out of the jail and out of the town. Some way that would not be suspected. But Steve would get no more help from the Sheriff.

"A Block H hand prob'ly killed him," he reflected grimly. "The mob'd kill me, but I'd already told the Sheriff what I knew, an' the mob wouldn't kill him. So he had to be shot first."

The storm of bullets through the windows lessened to a purposeful, steady stream. Steve rolled a cigarette and smiled mirthlessly at nothing. The Sheriff had wanted word carried to Lucy. That she was not to ride anywhere alone. The Sheriff had known something; something which when added to the information Steve had brought him, made him think she was in danger as well as her father. It checked up. The Bar Circle belonged to Lucy, now, and Steve's Uncle Peter had a claim on it. A dishonest claim, but apparently a valid one in law. If Lucy died. . . .

Steve's eyes burned in the darkness.

"There'd be nobody to fight the grab," he drawled, "an' twenty thousan' dollars is a lot o' money an' some folks might think it was worth a coupla killin's, one of 'em bein' Lucy."

The roaring rage of the mob outside changed subtly. Steve shook himself. Alone in a locked jail, with a dead sheriff as its only other occupant, and a mob outside raging to get in to kill him ——

"They blamin' the Sheriff on me, too," he said grimly, as he caught a raging shout.

He risked a quick look out of the window. A man with an axe was chopping at a flagpole that at some ancient time had been erected in a strictly temporary wave of patriotism.

"They'll batter down the door," said Steve. A bullet, coming through the window, missed him by inches only. He saw the flash. It came from the roof of the Palace Dance-hall. "Four-five fellas, up on the roofs, pluggin' at the windows. It'll keep me from shootin' at the batterin' gang, I rec'n. A right good general, somebody is. Bar Circle fellas must be real enthusiastic, an' that Hamby fella I didn't kill must ha' been right important. Folks are sure itchin' to get at me."

"I rec'n Uncle Peter kept my memory green—or black. He maybe gave out a little about my doin's, from time to time, as he figured they were likely to be."

The flagpole fell with a crash. The buzzing of the crowd died down to a deadly quiet. Steve, watching in snatched glimpses from the jail-window, saw ropes being passed under it for handholds.

"They'll come runnin' an' bust in the jail door right lively. Then they'll drag me out—me not knowin' the Sheriff's trick of gettin' away—an' lynch me right prompt. Of course, I can get some of 'em ——."

Then, in the darkness, he grinned. It was distinctly a mocking grin.

"Why should I kill folks who only think I killed two-three men?" he drawled to the echoes within the jail. "It'd be unkind to try to keep 'em out of here."

A match glowed in his cupped hands. The glow swept about the walls of the office. He took down a monster key and picked up the rifle he had fired before. Fumbling along the dingy wall, he found a belt of rifle cartridges. He flung it about himself. And then he felt his way out of the office and along the rock-walled passage which felt so cold as to give an impression of dampness. He reached the big door which would be the mob's objective.

There were shouted orders outside. For a mob, this one was being remarkably well led. When an order was shouted out, at least one man rushed to obey it, and others followed. Nobody seemed to notice that Swain, of the Block H, was giving most of the orders, nor that Block H men were among the most active in carrying them out. At that, though, the Bar Circle hands were definitely on the job, raging and willing to take any chance that would get them the man they believed had killed Dick Harrison. And there were many men in the mob who were there because they were thoroughly sick of having their cattle stolen, and considered that they would discourage rustling in the neighborhood of Tres Piños by a prompt avenging of the death of Hamby.

There were more marksmen up on the roofs, now, and as the long flagpole went wabbling toward the jail they poured a hail of bullets into the windows from which the battering-ram bearers could be fired into. The ram and its bearers looked, in the uncertain light, like some queerly monstrous centipedes whose legs moved not at all in the precise rhythm of such a creature, but very much at random.

The flagpole wabbled into position. It surged forward. The men who bore it seemed to get approximately into step and it gathered speed. Other men ran to seize the end of it and add their weight to the impact. When the tip of the pole was ten

feet from the end of the door, they were running. At five feet, they were at full speed. And then the pole smashed into the heavy jail-door with a terrific force.

And there was sheer anticlimax. The jail-door was unlocked. It flew open and hit the wall behind itself with a resounding smash. The flagpole and the foremost of its carriers went careening into the hallway of the jail, to spill there in a tangled, swearing mass.

The mass grew worse. Other men dropped the ropes with which they had carried the pole and with drawn guns and blood-thirsty yells plunged for the open door. They jammed it. For nearly a minute it was impossible for any men to get either into or out of that door. It was necessary for the pole and ropes to be completely withdrawn before those in front could disentangle themselves.

Through the bullet-shattered windows of the jail, then, came the ugly noise of a mob hunting among cells and under cots. . . . In every place where a panic-stricken man might try to hide from death in a place which offered no hiding-places.

And while they hunted, snarling and panting in their rage the wide-flung door of the jail moved slightly. It swung a little as if it would close. And a figure emerged from behind it, from a doorway the wide-flung door had hidden. That figure came out into the street and closed the massive door behind it, softly. It fitted a huge key to the lock and turned it painstakingly. And then it moved along beside the jail until an opportunity offered to slip into the shadows. The figure wore a rather battered hat, and it carried a short-barrel Winchester besides two battered sixguns, and from time to time it limped peculiarly, as if, say, one of the heels had been shot from its boots.

It was seen by the shivering, avidly watching dance-hall girls who waited to watch a lynching. It was also seen by certain small Mexican boys who had not been able to get inside the jail. But not one of them thought to notice it. Each and every one watched the dark windows with fascinated eyes, waiting for the yapping yell that would mean that Steve Galt had been discovered.

That yell did not come. Instead, there came a sudden pounding, a wrathful thumping, and then what amounted to a bellow of blood-curdling rage when the members of the mob found themselves locked in the jail they had so painstakingly broken into.

Even Steve heard that howl of pure fury. He had not hurried particularly, anyhow. He heard the poundings and the thump-

ings. As he mounted Duke, down by the willows, he heard the sound of shots begin. And as Duke bore him leisurely away from Tres Piños he continued to hear the fusillade of shots which was the members of the mob enragedly shooting loose the doorlock from its grip on the jail-door jamb.

A thought came to him. If the Sheriff had been right, and it was dangerous for Lucy to go riding alone. . . . A time when everybody was busy lynching one Steve Galt would be the safest for any action that would take Lucy Harrison out of the matters now pending between Steve's Uncle Peter and the estate of the late Dick Harrison.

"Shake a hoof, Duke," drawled Steve. "Bar Circle's over thataway. If anybody's home, we'll be gettin' shot at. But we got to take the chance."

Steve urged Duke to greater speed.

"Faster, horse!" he said grimly. "Uncle Peter'd know, anyhow, that Hamby was due to be found dead in Tres Piños tonight. An' here an' now is the chance for the biggest haul he ever made, if he's got the nerve to take it! An' Lucy disappearin' would be just what he'd need. . . ."

Duke's hoofs were drumming on the dry earth now.

There was a noise up ahead. Hoofs. Horses' hoofs. Voices yelping, rousing cattle bedded down for the night. The grunting, protesting murmuring noise made by disturbed cattle. A calf bawling hysterically for its mother, separated from it in the confusion. The answering bawl of its mother, furiously indignant with all her bovine associates for having crowded her offspring from her side. The clitter-clatter of shod hoofs. The beginning of the slow, drumming rumble of a herd protestingly on the move.

Steve swept up. Any disturbance he might create was so much to the good, tonight. He saw two—three riders as dim shapes. One of them whistled shrilly as he came pounding into view.

Steve drew his right-hand gun. He did not, of course, know how to answer that whistle. He swerved to head straight for the riding men, and a spout of flame flashed toward him. A shot crashed. He did not hear the bullet, but he snapped a shot at the gun-flash. Then another gun spat fire, twice.

Steve swerved sharply, his gun going, and plunged into the mass of cattle. He yelled shrilly. His other gun came out. Gun-flashes and harsh reports, plus shrill yells and Duke's lashing hoofs, combined with the normal uneasiness of cattle aroused after bedding-down to create a panic. The clumsy beasts whirled and

milled. Where there had been one calf bawling, there were suddenly fifty. Where one cow had emitted outraged noises, now there were half a hundred. And the noise of females and offspring can fret the nerves of males among all species. Certain bulls decided to leave this tumult. They started off. Then there were more gun-shots. Steve in the middle of the herd, and at least three other men on the outside, all shooting almost continuously, made an uproar which made nervous cattle frantic. And they bolted.

But it was not a stampede. The alarming noises came from too many directions at once. The herd split in a dozen pieces and lumbered heavily—but with the surprising speed of range-cattle—in at least as many directions. Steve moved with them and helped the splitting process. And before he was through the cattle were spreading to every point of the compass and the sound of Duke's iron-shod hoofs were indistinguishable in the pounding of hoofs toward each and every possible destination.

He ceased to create a din and rode on more quietly in the midst of cattle who spread out and ever spread out more, bellowing, and at last left him alone. He kept on toward the Bar Circle. He was curiously unable to see the comic angle to the fact of himself, credited with leadership of all the rustling on the nearby range, risking his life to stop the rustling of cattle whose ownership he did not even know.

Steve was not in a mood to smile.

"We coulda messed up those fellas, Duke," he drawled coldly, "but I kinda suspect we' needed more elsewhere. We need more speed, too. Swain's locked up in the jail at Tres Piños, unless they've busted out again, but Uncle Peter goes marchin' on. There's the Bar Circle, praise Gawd!"

Duke seemed to have squatted himself down close to the earth and to be sliding frictionlessly over it. He was actually running at a breakneck speed, and the thudding of his hoofs in hasty tempo and the occasional crash of sage brushed aside in his rush, or broken beneath him, told it. Steve was reloading.

He came racing up to the ranch house without caution. But his breath slowed down with Duke's hoofs as he reined in. The ranch was unquestionably at peace, so far. There was a light in the bunk house and the ranch cook was playing on a mandolin and singing a particularly mauldin Spanish ditty to himself. Nobody else seemed to be near. And in the ranch house itself there were two lights.

Steve, halted, looked coldly about him. No horses except those in the corral. If there were visitors, they expected to stay overnight. No. Over at one side a certain blotchy moving object was a horse. One visitor, maybe.

Steve drew a deep breath. He managed a faint grin. Those fellas out on the range, with that bunch of cattle an' a whistle-signal for recognition while they started a herd for the hills. . . . He'd been frightened for a while. Now he felt better.

Dismounting, he dropped the reins over Duke's head and swaggered up to the ranch-house steps. He mounted them and knocked on the door. After a long pause there were slow footsteps in answer. Heavily and deliberately they came to the door. Still more heavily and still more deliberately the knob turned and the door opened.

Jud Williams, foreman of the Bar Circle, stood outlined by lamplight that streamed into the hall from another room beyond. He squinted into the darkness. Then he recognized Steve.

As his mouth opened to roar furiously, his hand flashed to his hip.

And Steve, smiling his ironic smile, put the muzzle of a sixgun at Jud's belt-buckle and pressed gently.

"Don't Jud!" he drawled softly. "I don't want to shoot you. But I do want to speak to Lucy."

The eyes staring at him did not flinch, nor did the foreman of the Bar Circle move aside.

"Shoot an' to hell with yuh!" said Jud, grimly.

"Lucy's kinda expectin' me," said Steve gently. "With your kind permission I'll call her. Lucy!"

There was a little exclamation. Jud's voice boomed out in warning.

"It's Steve Galt!"

Lucy appeared, incredulously glad, trembling with relief.

"Steve!" she gasped. "They said—they said that you were in jail and—they were going to drag you out and lynch you!"

"I was, an' they were," said Steve in grim humor. "But they didn't, an' I ain't. In fact, they were in jail when I left. But I got word for you, Lucy. Don't wiggle, Jud, or I'll blow hell outa you. Listen here! The Sheriff says you ain't to go ridin' anywhere by yourself, at any time, for any reason. The folks that messed up your pa, they' right liable to be layin' for you. You' to have anyways two or three fellas on guard all the time. Understan'?"

"Y-yes!" Lucy was staring at him as if he were risen from the dead. "I—I'll do it, Steve, if you say so."

"I do say so," said Steve grimly. "An' one other thing. Comin' here skyhootin' with that message, I busted into three fellas herdin' up a couple hundred white-faces. They whistled at me an' shot when I didn't know the answer. On Bar Circle ground. Were they your men?"

She look at Jud Williams, who stood steady as a rock and watched for the ghost of a chance to get out his gun.

"Are they—are they our men, Jud?"

"Rustlers, if Steve's tellin' the truth," said Jud grimly. "I let every man on the ranch go to town to 'tend to Steve heah. An' I ain't goin' after 'em. Either Steve or me is goin' to get killed tonight, now he's heah."

Steve's lips twisted in rather bitter amusement.

"If anybody, Jud," he said, gently, "it's goin' to be you. In token whereof I'm takin' your gun." He did so. "I rec'n you're goin' to lose some cattle tonight, Lucy. Because I got me an idea that somebody'll be turnin' up an' Jud an' me got to stay right here an' stand 'em off. I'm stayin' a while."

Lucy stared.

"You mean ——"

"Tonight's a right good time for a kidnappin'," said Steve evenly. "The Sheriff said somethin' might be tried, an' it might occur to somebody that this is 'as good a time as any. So I'm stayin'."

"But—but if the boys find you here when they come back," said Lucy, anxiously, "they'll kill you! And—and your cousin Oliver is here now. . . . He didn't hear Jud call your name, though," she added quickly. "I'd come to see who it was who'd knocked. I was afraid it was—bad news—about you."

Steve's jaws had clamped like steel-traps.

"I rec'n," he said coldly, "I'll have a little talk with Cousin Oliver. Jud, you walk on ahead o' me."

He forced the Bar Circle foreman to walk slowly before him down the hallway. Into the room . . . Steve's cousin Oliver was there, white-faced and with every appearance of a man in hell. He could have heard the murmur of voices, but no words from the front door. Jud's rage-flushed face, his empty holster, and his enforced walk told of extremely enraging occurrences beyond. And Oliver Galt, white-faced, was fumbling for his gun when he saw and recognized Steve. He gasped. But then, to Steve's

utter and blank amazement, Oliver relaxed in such a let-down of tension that he fairly collapsed into a chair.

Of all men, Steve had thought he would be least welcome. But instead of showing dismay, his cousin gave an inarticulate cry of relief and gazed at Steve with the most passionate, hell-ridden gratitude that any man could express without words.

CHAPTER VII

OLIVER GALT looked something like Steve. He was slighter; more frail. His hair was darker than Steve's. It was almost black. And his skin was not possessed of the deep, even tan which many suns had given Steve. It was nearly olive, of that pallid type which never changes under any exposure. But the nose was the same, and if his eyes were not quite as widely set as Steve's, the shape of his mouth showed their kinship plainly enough. There was even a trace of the lines which bitterness etches upon a man's face—and Oliver, like Steve, was too young to have such marks upon him.

The main difference was in their chins. Steve's was square, almost heavy. Oliver's was almost womanish in its delicacy. It was, perhaps, a heritage from the mother of whom Steve knew nothing; only that his Uncle Peter had not been fortunate in his marriage.

Steve thrust Jud Williams into the room before him. He kept his gun-muzzle close against the foreman's spine. His eyes had narrowed thoughtfully. He was thinking, and thinking fast.

"Howdy, Cousin Oliver," he said dryly, after a moment. "I kinda looked for you to start shootin' when you saw me. But—uh—it looks like you don't bear me any special grudge for livin'."

Oliver got a grip on himself with a terrific effort. But he was shaking all over.

"N-no, Steve. I don't."

The lamplight on his face showed deep lines. Curiously contradictory lines. Right now his features were composing themselves after dread and an overwhelming relief. But marks of dissipation could be read upon them, and certain familiar lines which spoke of bitter unhappiness. And yet he was young enough, and his gaze was defiantly straight. It was consciously, deliberately straight. There was effort in his striving to avoid the look of furtiveness.

Altogether, he looked like a young man driven to desperation by some inner tumult.

Steve regarded him with keen, searching eyes. He was suspicious, but the unfeigned gladness with which Oliver had first seen him gave him furiously to think.

"There's somethin' right funny in the air, Oliver," he observed presently, in a meditative tone. "You looked gladder to see me than I was expectin'. Do you feel like talkin'? I got a hunch that you could tell me a lot."

Oliver steadied his hands. He licked his lips. He looked at Lucy, and swiftly looked away again. To Steve, suddenly, he looked pitiful. Because he was so plainly in torment. And a sudden, unformed suspicion came into Steve's mind. He waited for it to take shape. But he found with something like a mild surprise that he did not hate Oliver. Swain, yes. His Uncle Peter, even. But not Oliver. He remembered absurdly that when he—Steve—had been a persecuted, sullen small boy on the Block H, that Oliver had tried surreptitiously to share his pocket money with Steve, who had no pocket money at all. He hadn't defended Steve, of course. He'd never had quite that much courage. But he'd tried, though rather fearful of Swain and his father, to keep Steve from hating him too much. And at least once he'd been brave enough to testify for Steve when Swain accused him of rustling.

"You could help a lot, Oliver," drawled Steve again, "if you'd make up your mind to talk some."

Oliver licked his lips a second time.

"I—I'm glad they didn't lynch you, Steve," he said unsteadily.

"That ain't exactly what I meant," said Steve dryly. "Let's set down."

Oliver was disturbing, somehow, and there was that suspicion deepening in his mind. The Sheriff had said that Oliver had been courting Lucy pretty strong, before the matter of her father's old debt came up to start trouble between Dick Harrison and Steve's Uncle Peter. But somehow, though no words had been said to assure him of it, Steve could not feel that he needed to be jealous. He remembered, instead, that when he was twelve years old and his uncle had taken away the horse he'd so painstakingly trained, that Oliver hadn't wanted to accept it. He'd had to be threatened with a licking before he would. And—well—he hadn't been a tattletale, to get Steve into trouble. When he saw Steve secretly petting the little horse, he pretended that he hadn't, so Steve

wouldn't know that his hurt has been observed. Oliver must have had a pretty tough time too, Steve realized suddenly. If he'd looked up to his stronger cousin, as small boys do, to find that stronger cousin hating him as Steve had hated him couldn't have been pleasant. And Steve remembered his father speaking solemnly: *"He's all right at bottom. Us Galts generally are."*

Steve's father had been speaking of Oliver's father. But it might apply to the son. Steve frowned.

"Uh—Oliver," he drawled again. "You' my cousin. I started threatenin' to shoot you last night. I meant it. I still mean it. But now Swain ain't around, or Uncle Peter either, us two Galts might kinda get together an' try to preserve the peace an' dignity of the family."

Oliver shook his head rather desperately.

"Too late, Steve."

"Shucks," said Steve. His suspicion was deeper, now. "Look at me! I' been shot at by three separate gangs of folks today, an' Jud is just watchin' a chance to make a fourth. I'm still alive. An' I ain't as good as new, but I'm in reasonable good second-hand order. We might patch up a kinda second-hand peace."

Oliver swallowed and shook his head again.

"It's—too late," he repeated.

The lamplight showed his face pale beneath its olive tint. He didn't look at Steve, now. Once or twice he did glance at Lucy for the fraction of a second. And there was such bitter misery in his eyes at those moments that a brand-new hunch hit Steve so suddenly that he blinked. Glancing almost furtively at Lucy, Oliver looked like a man in hell. Hopeless, and despairing, and rather horribly resolute about something.

There was a pause. The lamp sent little flecks of soot up its chimney. Thin and attenuated, the voice of the ranch cook came from without:

"Ah, sí á tu venta-a-ama llega una palo-o-oma. . . ."

He had finished singing about one bird and was beginning on another. Steve's horse, outside, stamped on the soft earth. These small noises came through the vast stillness of the night.

Lucy opened her mouth to speak, and did not. Jud Williams watched Steve, savagely waiting for a chance at the man he believed the murderer of Lucy's father.

Steve blinked in amazement at the hunch he'd just had come to him. But it looked more and more plausible the more he considered it. So he said slowly:

"Uh, Oliver, I'm goin' to ask you for advice. I broke out of jail just now. There's a gang huntin' me. I ought to be makin' for distant parts. But—uh——" Here Steve played his hunch to the limit. "What d'you think I ought to do? Ought I stay here a while?"

Oliver jerked his head up. His eyes met Steve's. They were agonized. Terrified. Pleading. He swallowed.

"Yes!" he said desperately. "Stay, Steve! For God's sake!"

Steve soberly relaxed. His hunch was verified. Half of it, anyway. He was quite sure of one thing, and fairly sure of another, that he had not even suspected when he came into this room. And both of them were disturbing for more reasons than one. They needed thinking over. A great deal of thinking over.

He leaned back in his chair, his eyes narrow and meditative. He fumbled for tobacco. He seemed to feel Jud Williams tensing for a leap.

"Jud," he drawled without looking at him, "if you try to jump me, I ain't goin' to kill you. I'm goin' to put a bullet in each leg an' spank you!"

Jud settled back sullenly. Steve pulled out his makings. He laid a creased cigarette-paper on his knee and abstractedly spilled the requisite amount of tobacco into it. His right hand still held a gun on Jud Williams. He spread the tobacco along the crease, picked up the paper between index and middle finger, and rolled his cigarette with a single movement of the two. He licked it, still lost in a brown study. He glanced up to see Lucy watching him with anxious, solicitous eyes.

"Steve, I—see bandages. Are you—hurt?"

"I'm right hard to kill," said Steve. "I' lost a little epidermis an' a lot of convictions lately, but I'll do."

She hesitated.

"Isn't it—dangerous for you to stay here?" she asked wretchedly. "When the hands come back from town ——"

"They'll be kept busy a while, I'm suspectin'," said Steve absently. "I'm tryin' to work out somethin' in my mind."

He lighted his cigarette, frowning as he regarded his cousin Oliver. He had plenty to work on. The Sheriff had said that Oliver had been courting Lucy, and the look in his eyes when he glanced at her was proof that he was in love with her. But that wasn't all. There was a queer anguish mixed up with the other emotions in his expression. Anguish, and desperation, and despair too. Why despair?

Steve had a hunch so strong that he'd blinked when it first came to him, but he wasn't sure about it. He was sure, though, about something else. Oliver had been almost hysterically glad when he saw Steve, and he had been terrified before he knew who it was. He had said desperately, *"Stay, Steve! For God's sake!"* when Steve had asked if he should go or stay. And Steve did not believe he said it because he wanted Steve to remain and be killed.

It meant that Oliver had been afraid, for Lucy, and that Steve did not alarm him. It meant that he was going to need help before long, on Lucy's behalf. When you added those facts to the Sheriff's message to Lucy, and Steve's discovery of Hell Sink, and the conditions under which Steve's Uncle Peter held the Block H—well—the several items added up neatly to a very definite sum.

The only thing to do was wait and listen. Meanwhile there was a question as to who it was that Oliver had been dreading to see when Steve came into the room.

Steve spoke suddenly.

"Uh, two men killed in town tonight."

Lucy looked uneasy. But Steve was watching Oliver. A glimmer of almost hopeless hope appeared in Oliver's eyes.

"One," said Steve meditatively, "was a fella named Hamby. The other was the Sheriff."

Oliver looked down, the hope gone from his expression.

Jud Williams made an inarticulate sound like a growl. His eyes were like glowing coals. Baleful hate seemed to permeate his whole body as he looked at the man he believed had killed his friend.

"But—Steve," said Lucy unhappily, "it wasn't ——"

"Me? No," said Steve. "I didn't kill either one. But the evidence is right good that I killed both. I did have a chance to kill one man, though, an' I'm dam' sorry I let him go. Swain."

The tensing of Oliver's lips was a sign Steve had been watching for. He nodded thoughtfully to himself.

"Things are shapin' up," he murmured. "Maybe for me to get killed, an' maybe ——"

He broke off, listening. The cook's wailing tenor broke off suddenly.

"Cuando el cu-u-u-ure nos da su bene ——"

His voice rose to a squeak and was still. There was a very great silence. The lamp made a sudden humming noise. Lucy stirred in her chair, and the creaking was clearly audible. Then a horse went, *"Hr-r-r-rugh!"* somewhere and a saddle creaked.

Lucy went white. Of sheer instinct she put out her hand protectively toward Steve. Jud Williams' eyes flamed in triumph. He grinned savagely. But Steve turned to look at Oliver, and his face took on the ironic, detached expression he wore in his most reckless moments. Because Oliver had turned a sickly, deathly color. He looked like a dead man.

"Jud," said Steve dryly, "I'm goin' to give you back your gun. On your promise not to shoot me with it for five minutes."

"I won't promise a dam' thing!" cried Jud in triumphant hatred. "Not a dam' thing ——"

"Yes you will, Jud," said Steve gently. "Listen to those horses. Would Bar Circle men ride up real soft? Real careful not to make any noise?"

Jud listened. Then he turned upon Steve with his fingers working.

"Yuh gang!" he raged. "Gawd ——"

Steve tossed him the gun he had taken away but a few minutes before.

"You go an' squat by a window over there," he ordered softly. "Oliver, he's goin' to occupy the parlor. I'll hold the front door. Do all the shootin' you can, so it'll seem like a lot of us here."

With his gun incredibly returned, Jud Williams hesitated for a long instant, torn by rage and suspicion and a new strange doubt. Then another saddle creaked. A bit jangled. It was on the other side of the house. And there was no conceivable reason for Bar Circle men, returning from Tres Piños, to be on that side of the house at all. There was certainly no reason for them to be furtive about their approach. And Jud Williams, raging, postponed revenge until this patent danger should be past.

"I don't know y'game," he snapped harshly, "but I'm goin' to kill you afterwards for killin' Dick Harrison!"

He vanished. They heard him easing up a window. Oliver looked at his guns, his hands shaking a little. His lips were twisted in a sort of desperate resolution, though his whole air was that of a man who is damned and dying.

Steve touched his shoulder.

"Steady, Oliver," he said soberly. "I rec'n we can fix this up afterwards ——"

There was the faintest perceptible shake of Oliver's head.

"Too late," he said in a voice that sounded as if his throat hurt. "Too late. But I'll fight."

Steve remembered the whistle signals of the rustlers he had interrupted at their work.

"I rec'n they'll whistle first?"

A nod, so slight that even Steve could hardly see it. Then Oliver moved away from Steve's hand. His face was ghastly. He went, lurching a little, toward the parlor. At the door he turned.

"I'll—shoot straight," he said hoarsely. "Don't worry about that!"

He vanished. And Steve, remembering something, started suddenly and made an arrested gesture as if to call him back. Dick Harrison was laid out in that parlor. . . .

The parlor door closed softly. Steve frowned ruefully at it. Then he shrugged. He felt a movement by his elbow. Lucy.

"Steve," she said quite steadily, "is this—somebody come to—to get me?"

"That's what I'm guessin'," said Steve soberly. "The Sheriff had some kinda reason to figure on it; seems like. An' he seemed to think you wouldn't get back. So I'm glad I'm here."

"You're—going to fight them?"

"Jud an' Oliver an' me," admitted Steve, smiling.

There was very little light, here in the hall. Only such light as came through the room they had just left. But in it Steve could see Lucy looking up at him with a quaint confidence which was not lessened at all by an even greater anxiety.

"I—don't want you to risk your life any more," she said somewhat unsteadily. "Tonight—while you were in Tres Piños, it was—auful, Steve. For me. So—I'd like you not to risk—any more than you can help."

"Shucks, Lucy! We've got to chase those fellas away!" protested Steve, smiling again. "We' got to do that!"

"I know. But—there's some dynamite in the tool shed," she told him desperately. "The men—took some of it to Tres Piños, but not all. If I have Jud—set off a few sticks, wouldn't it frighten these men away?"

Steve grinned.

"Not hardly," he said mildly. "It'd look like there were only a coupla fellas here, an' that they were right desperate. When all of us get shootin', though, we'll sound like an army."

He opened the door a crack and peered out.

"No hurry," he observed comfortably. "They're goin' to whistle first. Lucy, tell me somethin'. Jud is plumb sure I' killed your pa. Just why don't you think so? An' Jud thinks it's my gang

comin' outside, an' he's all mixed up in his mind. Why don't you think so?"

Lucy merely smiled.

"I believe in you," she said simply. "That's all. So of course I don't believe the stories they tell about you."

Steve opened his mouth to speak and closed it again. His eyes wandered, suddenly, to the doorway leading into the parlor. An idea had come to him and a struggle began inside of Steve. Oliver wasn't what he'd thought. He was a Galt, and all the Galts were sound at bottom, and there had been no ugly stories to go the rounds about Oliver. With the Sheriff dead, Steve's chance of ever clearing his name of a black sheep's stigma was slim indeed. And Steve had seen plainly that Oliver loved Lucy. It wouldn't be pleasant to do it, but surely it would be best to fix matters so that if he were killed, that Lucy would have some faint, lingering doubt of him so it wouldn't be too impossible for her to learn to care for Oliver. . . .

"But—uh—Lucy," said Steve gently, "I never could explain away the evidence there is against me, sayin' I killed your pa. Nobody'd believe me if I told the whole story. Not even you. You ain't sure ——"

Lucy looked at him gravely. She was pale, was Lucy, and she was far from any lessening of her grief over her father's death. But her hand touched Steve's sleeve.

"Steve," she said with a little catch in her voice, "would I—would I kiss my father's murderer?"

She kissed him. And Steve went quite rigid for an instant.

"Oh, my Gawd!" he said unsteadily. He caught her to him. Her lips met his bravely. "Oh, my Gawd. . . ." said Steve. A whistle shrilled outside. A signal. Waiting for a sign from somebody in the Bar Circle ranch house that all was clear.

Steve flung back his head with a queer shake, as if to clear it.

"Now I'm goin' to raise hell sure enough," he said evenly. "Lucy, somethin's goin' to bust. Hell itself couldn't stop me now. Not after that!"

He flung open the door he had elected to guard. In the darkness he saw a bunched knot of horses and men, already assured of the emptiness of the bunk house—the cook had fled—and of the comparative desertion of the ranch. They were moving leisurely toward the house.

Steve laughed as he walked out into the darkness with its spangled roof of stars. He went down the porch steps, both guns

out, still laughing. And suddenly he went toward the knot of men at a run.

"Get outa here!" he roared. "You, Block H men from Hell Sink! Get outa here before I take you an' spank you!"

A streak of fire spurted from one of his gun muzzles. A second followed the first. There was a spitting flame in answer—and then from two windows of the ranch house came other spouting flames and crackling detonations.

In seconds the darkness was alive with gun-flashes. Steve ran on, laughing uproariously, his guns bellowing. There was a crashing of glass. Then another. The guns behind him came closer. Jud Williams and Oliver had come through the windows and were racing after Steve, their guns going savagely. It should have been suicide. It was the ultimate in sheer folly, for three men on foot to charge better than a dozen mounted ones, and breaking cover to do it.

But because it was unheard of, the mounted men did not believe it. The three racing, shooting figures seemed inevitably but the first of an overwhelming force.

Horses screamed and reared madly as bullets seared them or they smelled blood. They struck out with their hoofs. The close-bunched knot of men split into as many pieces as there were men. Shooting, those men sank home their spurs and fled from the running trio. And once separated, each of the fugitives fancied himself the sole target of the three on foot.

As suddenly as if a prearranged order had been given, the riders of the night fled into the darkness to the sound of racketing, racing hoofs. The sound was scattered and uneven. It grew faint and died away.

Steve stopped shooting and began to laugh again. Jud Williams came up to him, grimly.

"Lookaheah!" he said savagely, "I said I'd kill you for killin' Dick Harrison. Get out yuh gun!"

Steve continued to laugh.

"Shoot, Jud! Shoot away!" he gasped. "Your gun won't go off. There ain't anything in Gawd's world can kill me now!"

"Are y'crazy?" snarled Jud. "I said I'm goin' to kill you! Y'killed Dick Harrison! Get out y'gun!"

Steve sobered himself with a tremendous effort. But his insane conviction persisted. It was not a hunch. It was much more. He simply knew with an illogical positiveness that since Lucy had

kissed him there was nothing on earth that could possibly harm him.

"Point your gun at the ground, Jud,' he said curiously, "an' pull the trigger. Gawd knows how I know, but it won't go off! Try it, Jud!"

There was a little, empty click in the darkness. Jud swore.

"——! I shot it empty an' didn't reload. How'd y'know?"

"I didn't," said Steve, again hilariously. Then he sobered himself again and added soberly, "But when one miracle's happened tonight—"

"Y'drunk!"

"I am," said Steve quietly. "Drunker'n you'll ever be in your life, Jud. A jag that'll last a long time, too. Where's Oliver?"

Oliver came up, reloading. His teeth chattered as he walked.

"I—I shot straight, Steve," he gasped. "I—I shot straight!"

"Yeah," agreed Steve. He paused. "Are you ridin' on now?" His attitude was quaintly paternal.

"Y-yes. I—I've got to!"

"An' I'm ridin' with you," said Steve. "We're headin' the same way. Those fellas won't be comin' back."

He led the way back toward the house. And Jud Williams had reloaded his gun by this time, and he followed Steve with a weapon that would undoubtedly kill Steve if he aimed it and pulled the trigger. But Jud did not. Steve acted like a madman. And there is always a queer tendency among men to consider madmen as touched of God. Besides, Jud was much too bewildered to think of killing Steve any more.

Lucy was waiting on the porch. Steve stood before her, with Duke's reins rather absurdly over his arm. He was acutely conscious of the other two men present.

"I'm goin' now, Lucy," he said awkwardly. "I—uh—somehow I kinda think things are goin' to be straightened out soon."

"Y-yes, Steve." She was straining her eyes to look at him. They seemed full of tears. "Please—be careful."

"I will," said Steve soberly. He did not want to go away from Lucy. Not after she had kissed him. But there was something that had to be attended to. Something that only he, as the black sheep of his family, could attend to. "I got right much to live for now, Lucy. I'm sure goin' to be careful. But please keep somebody handy around you. I'm hopin' to clear up a lot of things in the next day or two, but please have somebody guardin' you."

He mounted. Oliver was already in the saddle. And Steve

looked back at Lucy's slender, boyish figure outlined by the trickle of lamplight from within the house. Jud Williams stood beside her, a puzzled and bewildered man who could not understand why he did not even now shot down the man who must have killed Dick Harrison.

Oliver started away without a word. Steve followed him.

For perhaps a mile they moved across the range in a complete silence. Twice Oliver hesitated as if to rein in; to stop; to separate from Steve. Each time he rode on, and each time Steve ignored the hesitation. But at the end of a mile Oliver hesitated a third time, and did stop. Steve had already noted that Oliver was not headed for the Block H ranch house. His course aimed more nearly for the hills.

"Steve," said Oliver. He seemed to swallow nothing whatever. "Where are you going?"

"With you," said Steve quietly.

Oliver hesitated yet again, and then said desperately:

"You can't."

"You're goin' to Hell Sink, ain't you?"

There was silence. Perhaps Oliver nodded, but if so Steve could not see the movement. Oliver was sitting with both hands on his saddle-horn. He seemed to be staring at Steve with a mixture of hope and anguish and desperation. And there was a trace of panic in the way he held himself, too.

"I'm thinkin'," said Steve quietly, "that you ain't cut out for rustlin', Oliver. Kinda sick of it, ain't you?"

His cousin's voice, when it came, was wrenched and rather pitiful.

"My God, yes!"

"I rec'n I can manage to get you out of it," said Steve. "I' been hatin' you right hard, Oliver, but it looks like I forgot somethin'. Us Galts. . . . If things work out like I figure, I can get you clear of the mess."

"You can't get me clear," said Oliver hoarsely. "You can't!"

His horse reached down and nibbled at a bit of foliage within reach. Steve rolled a cigarette, thinking. He struck a match and lighted it.

"If you're thinkin'," he said mildly, "about your killin' Dick Harrison ——"

There was a gasp. Oliver jerked his horse's head as if to bolt. Starlight glittered on a drawn weapon.

Steve flicked the burnt match away.

"Of course I know you did it," he said soberly. "I knew it back in Lucy's house. I saw you lookin' at Lucy. You love her, an' you killed her father. . . . Nothin' else would've made you look like that. Not even bein' sent on ahead of a kidnappin' gang to signal them that it was all clear to go ahead. I know that too, of course. But also I know that, lovin' Lucy, you were all set to fight 'em off instead. That was why you were so glad to see me. I was somebody else to help fight. An' for Dick Harrison again, when we rode away from the Bar Circle jus' now, I saw the speckled legs of the horse you're ridin'. I saw 'em once before, in a gun-flash when y'made me trade boots with you."

Oliver sat still on his horse. He groaned.

"Why—why didn't you tell Lucy?"

"Because I saw you were in hell already," said Steve gently, "an' I wanted to know things. How'd it happen, Oliver?"

Silence. Then:

"I—sent him a note, not signed," said Oliver hoarsely. "I told him to come to that shack and he'd find out how to keep from paying that old debt again. He came. And I—I told him that I'd clear up the whole business and help break up the rustling besides if he'd get Lucy to marry me. She—likes me, but she—wouldn't. . . . And he wanted to know how I could do what I offered. I—I was desperate, Steve! I wanted to get clear, and—there was Lucy. . . . I started to tell him . . . and he pulled a gun and swore he'd see me hung ——"

Steve puffed steadily on his cigarette.

"He always did hate rustlers," he said without a hint of irony. "A hot-tempered cuss, Dick Harrison. He most likely would've shot you. So you shot him before you thought—twice. An' then you went crazy for fear he'd live an' tell Lucy what you'd told him, an' you emptied your gun in him."

Oliver made a sound in his throat.

"An' you rode away," Steve went on quietly, "after puttin' back Harrison's gun an' taking his money-belt, tryin' to make it look like a robbery-killin'. And you met a rider. You made him trade boots with you, givin' him the money-belt besides. You wanted some other boots because you'd just remembered that your tracks were in the shack, an' you couldn't make yourself go back an' mess 'em up."

"I—I was crazy, Steve," cried Oliver hoarsely. "I was crazy! If he'd told Lucy what I told him —— But I can't stand it any

longer, Steve! I'll go in town with you an' tell the whole business! I'll tell everything I know. Clear you and wipe out the rustling besides. . . ."

Steve smiled in wry amusement, in the darkness.

"You wouldn't get a chance, Oliver," he said dryly. "If I went in town with you, I'd be strung up before you could say a word. An' Swain's men would see you didn't get a chance to say anything after. Us bein' sighted together would be a death-warrant for the pair of us, not just me."

"I don't care any longer!" cried Oliver passionately. "I'm sick of it ——"

Steve continued to smile faintly.

"We'll go to Hell Sink, Oliver," he drawled. "This is my lucky night. Swain's been runnin' the rustlin', I think. I'll kill Swain. For the honor of the family, then, we'll tell a few lies, an' after he's dead we'll prove he killed Dick Harrison. I' been framed so much I rec'n I know how it's done."

"But afterwards——"

"I don't rec'n," said Steve quietly, "you can marry Lucy. No. Not that."

There was a long silence. Oliver's horse moved a little, to browse on a second bit of foliage. Then Oliver reined him aside.

"Come on!" he said hoarsely.

Steve followed as he sent his mount forward in a mad rush for the pass into the hills. They thundered together over the level range and up the gently rolling ground. The two horses' hoofs clattered on stone as the hills swallowed them. Sparks flashed from their hoofs as they went recklessly onward in pitch-darkness. Oliver pushed the pace unmercifully, riding in a peculiar desperate silence. Steve followed closely.

They were far within the hills when Oliver reined in again.

"Keep quiet when I talk," he said harshly. Steve could not see his face at all. "I'll be able to pass you in. But neither one of us is likely to get out again."

"I'll take a chance on that," said Steve composedly. "This is my lucky night."

Oliver put spurs to his pinto horse again. He rode recklessly, and at a certain spot he whistled shrilly. There was an answer. He rode on. Steve followed suit, searching with his eyes for the hiding-place of the man who had been watching the way. He saw nothing but towering blacknesses which were cliffs. Oliver led on

past the columnar edge of a rock rising abruptly from a valley-bottom.

"Hamby got killed back yonder this mornin'," Steve remembered suddenly. "I saw it. We're gettin' close."

Oliver went on at a savage, breathless, heedless pace. The two of them went whirling past the little pocket in which Steve had prepared to stand at bay. On. . . . Up a steep declivity and into a wide and placid valley bed in which herds of cattle grazed contentedly. There were night-herds riding a night trick up in the hills, and singing nasally to their charges.

"This," said Steve grimly, "is nerve. Night-herdin' on account of rustlers in the hills, an' servin' as sentries for those same rustlers at the same time."

A rider hailed them.

"Howdy!"

It was the friendliest of hails, but it called for an answer which Oliver gave. The rider slipped back to his herd and his singing.

This was the perfection of a rustling scheme. A big cattle owner has too much of his own to risk trying to rustle cattle on the side. But by that very fact it was a perfect cover. Steve's Uncle Peter would never be suspected of rustling cattle, because of the fact of owning a sizable ranch himself—owning it, that is, until his death. But it would be foolish even for him to be a rustler. Steve frowned, trying to understand his uncle's folly. He would have a larger income, until his guilt was discovered, but the increased income would not pay him for the danger. Not when it was considered that he would have a sizable income without any risk at all if he merely remained an honest man.

Steve gave it up. It was rank foolishness. But its folly had prevented suspicion up to now. Here, for example, Block H riders guarding cattle against the rustling they themselves carried out. No one would ever dream that these herds in Big Valley, and these riders on guard, covered the mouth of Hell Sink against discovery.

Steve rode at Oliver's stirrups through an opening which appeared magically as they headed toward what seemed to be blank cliff. It was black and cold and damp in this narrow crevice. The horses' hoofs echoed and reëchoed weirdly.

"Howdy!" said a voice from utter obscurity.

"Me," said Oliver restlessly. "Say, I——"

"Swain's goin' to give you hell!" the voice told him grimly. "Th' gang that went for that girl come back all shot up. 'Dozen men jumped 'em."

"A posse came to the ranch," explained Oliver uneasily. "I couldn't find our gang to warn 'em. A posse hunting Steve Galt."

"Swain's goin' to give you hell!" repeated the voice. "Who's with yuh?"

Oliver mumbled a name. It seemed to satisfy the watcher. The two riders moved on. They rode for rods in the echoing way, with only a thin ribbon of stars overhead. Then the path widened before them and the stars arched out over their heads. Hell Sink spread out to their view.

There was a shack over at one side, in size quite large enough to serve as a duplicate of the Block H bunk house, but altogether unpainted and slovenly made. A rough fence divided the great sink-hole into two unequal parts, and there was a corral close by the shack. Horses moved about in it. There was one bunch of ten or more animals, however, huddled together still saddled, as if recently ridden in.

Oliver reined in. Perhaps it was a last-minute shrinking from the desperate venture before the two of them. After all, one may be bitterly unhappy over one's past misdeeds, and agonizingly anxious to end such courses for the future, and still find it a very difficult thing to face a man whom one has dreaded, feared, and obeyed. The one is a matter of conscience. The other is a matter of courage and habit and the psychological grip of a stronger mind.

Steve felt Oliver's last-minute wavering.

"Swain'll hang out in that shack yonder?" drawled Steve.

"Y-yes," said Oliver hoarsely. "I'm—I'm coming with you."

Then there was a shrill whistle behind them in the recesses of the trail from which they had just emerged Not a single, high-pitched note, however. It was a succession of short blasts, at which Oliver gasped.

"That's the alarm! They—they've just found out there's a stranger here!"

Steve nodded. He began to smile peculiarly.

"I rec'n," he drawled, "that fella in the pass, he happened to know that when you gave a name for me, that the fella it belongs to was somewheres else."

There were poundings of feet in the clumsily built shack. Men began tumbling from its exits, gun in hand. Some mounted. Others saw the dark, indistinct figures of the two on horseback. They ran toward them. Steve drew his two guns with an air of infinite deliberation. A shot whined over their heads.

"This," said Steve grimly, "is my lucky night!"

CHAPTER VIII

OLIVER moved, after a ten-second pause of stunned indecision after the alarm. He made a grab for Duke's bridle, and Duke swerved sidewise. He did not allow anybody but Steve to touch his head. His swerve spoiled Steve's aim as he was about to pour a hail of lead into the scattered, running figures.

"Come on!" gasped Oliver. "Swain hasn't gotten back yet! We can't get him! He isn't here! Come on!"

A bullet flashed past Steve's shoulder and crashed against the cliff behind him.

Oliver grabbed again at Duke's bridle. Steve touched him with his spurs and he bounded forward, tearing Oliver's hand free. Then, together, the two horses swept across the open space, passing before but away from the running men. In twenty acres, though, there is not much hiding place for two men and two horses, when fifteen other men are hunting them.

"Fence here!" panted Oliver. "Jump it!"

The pinto pony soared upward. Duke cleared the same obstacle easily. He landed near a recumbent cow who scrambled to her feet agitatedly and went high-tailing it off into nowhere. Then there were cattle all about the two riders. Sore, and frightened, and peevish cattle. Bar Circle steers that had had their brands blotted to Double Wheel, and would presently have an entirely illegal transaction given the appearance of strict honesty by the painstaking cancellation of the blotted brand and an open and above-board Block H applied. Lightning-Bolt cows which would presently share in the process save that they would be branded to represent purchased stock from the Injun Head. And Skullbone stock—originally Lazy C—and Lazy Eights that had been branded as calves with the Crazy Fork.

Here was where cattle eased off their home range into the Block H herds were doctored into the semblance of cattle duly bought by Peter Galt. The coverage was perfect. The brand-blotting was not the usual sort of thing at all. So far not one man had suspected the supposedly purchased stock. The only time of danger was when the brands were fresh, and here was a twenty-acre corral where hundreds of head could be kept, if hay-fed, until the branding-burns healed over. And of course, bought stock from other ranches could be readily and quietly shipped to normal markets by Peter Galt, when his own brand was on it.

The two racing horses wove in and out among the cattle in the darkness. And every steer and cow was up, now, and all on their feet were moving, so the two riders bent low could hardly be distinguished amid tossing horns and upraised heads in the dim starlight.

"This way!" panted Oliver. "Over to the house and leave your horse! There's a sort of cave under the cliff. Hide there——"

Steve had followed Oliver's orders much more than he was accustomed to take orders from anybody. But with the sounds of pursuit behind him—men already leaping their horses over into the cattle corral, and other men hunting savagely among the milling cattle—it was still wisest to follow as long as Oliver knew the ground and he did not.

He saw Oliver slipping from his horse. Oliver swarmed over the separating fence and ran for the cliffs that ringed in the Sink. Steve essayed to follow suit. But he stopped to knot Duke's reins on the saddle-horn, in case he needed Duke. Then there'd be no confusion of training to make Duke think he ought to stay put because his reins trailed. Steve swung up on the fence himself. But his spurs caught in barbed wire. When he alighted on the proper side, Oliver had vanished.

Yapping voices. Somebody came out of the pass they had entered, running. He yelled indistinguishably to nearby men, paused, and ran back into the pass again. Evidently he was the guard and had run out to give more detailed information than his whistle signals could convey. Now he was back at his post again. Cattle milled alarmedly in the ten acres allotted to them. They were brand-sore and restless in any case. Now they were frightened and inclined to be dangerous.

Steve gazed about him. He was in Hell Sink, headquarters of the rustlers whose scapegoat he had been, with at least fifteen men hunting him here, and all the world outside savagely anxious to lynch him. He was in no particularly enviable situation.

"An' Swain ain't here," he murmured coldly, "an' if I'm to do Lucy any good I've got to get him an' Uncle Peter both, or make 'em do some plain an' fancy explainin'. I rec'n——"

The hiding-place Oliver had intended was lost in the darkness, alike of the night and of the shadows cast by encircling cliffs. Steve stood sturdily in the starlight, smiling faintly, listening to the noise of the men who searched for him so earnestly.

"I rec'n it's the bunk house for me," he drawled.

He slipped across the open space before him. At one moment

he paused by a heap of huge boulders which had evidently rolled away from the base of the cliff when falling from its side. Again, he merely stood motionless when other men passed near enough for him to see their moving forms in the deep darkness about. Standing still, so, he was missed simply because he was motionless. Then he moved quickly to the bunk-house wall.

Seconds later he was inspecting its interior from the crack of a door partly ajar. It was empty. He slipped inside, gun in hand, and surveyed it coolly. Bunks from floor to ceiling. Greasy, unkempt chairs and tables. . . .

Somebody touched one of the doors, from outside. Steve leaped catlike to a position beside the door-frame. There was not much light inside here. Not so much, at any rate, but that he might carry out his next scheme. He was on the side of the door-frame, anyhow, which would be hidden when the door came open. It opened now. A figure entered.

Steve knew by the footsteps that the figure was alone. He moved swiftly forward, gun out.

"There's a gun in your ribs," he drawled softly, "don't squawk any!"

A gasping, bleating noise, much-strangled, came from the figure Steve's gun pressed against. Steve put his left hand on its shoulder and swung it about. He gazed into the terrified, wide, panic-stricken eyes of Miguel—Juana's husband.

"Hello!" said Steve ironically. "You' in cahoots here too?"

"Dios y todas los santos!"

Miguel choked, his eyes starting from his head.

"Yeah," said Steve in grim humor. "Gawd an' all the saints! It's me. I'm here. I see you recognize me, too. What are you doin' here?"

Miguel's knees knocked together.

"I—I——" Miguel swallowed. He made a slobbering sound. "I—*Estebanito*, I—I had to work weeth these men or be keeled. So I worked. But keeling ees not to my taste, an' I—I would not harm you, *mi Estebanito!* No! So when they went to look for you, I came here."

"Afraid of bullets, most likely," pointed out Steve calmly. "Where's a good hidin'-place till Swain comes? Quick!"

"Dios mio!" gasped Miguel. "Take away thee gun, *Estebanito!* Eet might go off. See, thee hammer-r——"

Steve jammed it deeper into Miguel's ribs.

"It's up. It stays up. But it falls on a shell unless you talk, Miguel. Where's a good hidin'-place?"

"I—*oh, madre de*——"

Somebody else was coming. Several men, growling.

"One o' those horses was Oliver's," one was snarling. "That pup's goin' to get killed, Swain 'r no Swain——"

A tumult set up at the mouth of the pass through the rock. The men outside halted. Steve could hear a murmur.

"Swain's comin' back. . . . It's Swain. . . . There's the fellas. . . ."

Steve's lips were close to Miguel's ear as he murmured:

"One little squawk, Miguel, an' Juana'll be a fat widow. You come along with me!"

He soundlessly urged his quaking erstwhile nurse across the shack. There was a door there. The two of them slipped noiselessly out of it. Steve shook his head impatiently. No windows on this side. He could hear, but not see. He flattened himself against the wall just as there were two shots and a sudden smothered yell, and then a rushing of men.

They came back, in their midst a dark figure struggling.

"They got Oliver," said Steve coolly. "But I rec'n he's just as safe as I am, right now. An' maybe as safe as if he was with me, by Gawd!" Oliver had disappeared with an amazing suddenness and Steve was not sure about him. "Anyways, Swain's comin' now."

A drumming of hoofs and the babbling of voices. The hoof-beats came sweeping across the floor of the Sink and stopped before the bunk house. Men dismounted. Steve heard Swain's heavy voice.

"What's th' matter?"

A voice snarled accusations. The men sent to raid the Bar Circle had been jumped by a dozen men, and Oliver had given no warning. He had ridden into Hell Sink with a man, nobody knew who, but a stranger. The guard in the passage had reported it, and they had found his horse.

Steve was close to admiration for Swain when he heard him merely ask briefly:

"What's the horse like?"

They told him, describing Duke with perfect accuracy. And then Swain bellowed.

"Y'fools! That's Steve Galt's horse! He's in the Sink heah! I' been chasin' him with half the range, an' the rest of th' mob's over at Miguel's house now, hopin' he'll ha' gone theah! Miguel tol' me what his horse looked like! Steve Galt's in th' Sink!"

Steve, on the other side of the bunk house, heard Miguel's teeth

begin to chatter like castanets. He pressed his gun muzzle a little further into Miguel's shrinking ribs, hissing softly the while for silence.

Swain's voice cracked out savagely:

"You, Buck! Half a dozen men with yuh! Go to th' pass-mouth an' build a big fire theah! Y'watchin' to see Steve Galt don't get out! Bring Oliver heah!"

He stamped inside, snarling wordlessly. Steve whispered gently in Miguel's ear:

"So! You told Swain what my horse was like, huh?"

"Por el amor de Dios, Estebanito——" panted Miguel, *"Nuestra señora——"*

"Shut up," drawled Steve. "I'm learnin' things. But if you live through the night it'll sure be the love o' Gawd that saves you!"

There were voices inside the bunk house, now. They growled and snarled. More men crowded inside, separated from Steve and the shriveling Miguel by the flimsy and far from sound-tight wall alone. There were yet other stampings, and Steve knew that Oliver had been brought in. The door through which Steve had slipped was fast, now. Two men were leaning against it.

"I—I don't give a damn!" cried Oliver passionately. He had evidently just been released before Swain. "I'm sick of it! When you want to carry off Lucy, I'm through!"

A pause. A thumping noise, as if Swain, seated astride a chair, pounded grimly on its back.

"You"—thump—"you' through when I'm through with yuh!"—Thump. Then Swain snarled. "By Gawd, if I didn't need yuh I'd kill yuh now!" Another pause. He would be glaring at Oliver with red-rimmed, hate-filled eyes. "Y'damned fool! You' in this as deep as anybody! You'll do like you' told, or——"

"I won't!" Oliver's voice was shrill. He panted desperately. "Do what you like! Kill me, damn you! I won't cover up anything any more! I'm through! I'm finished! Shoot and to hell with you!"

There was a pause. Men murmured. Somebody growled wrathfully and disgustedly. Someone spat against the wall to which Steve's ear was pressed. Then another thump upon the back of Swain's chair.

"Yeah?" His voice was purring, thick with rage. "Y'won't cover up nothin' else, huh? But y'will! You quit when I'm through with you, an' not before. An' heah's why!"

He stopped and spat.

"Steve Galt's in the Sink heah. He can't get out. We'll hunt 'im

down an' kill 'im by daylight. An' the Bar Circle men are huntin' him at Miguel's. Every man of 'em. An' while they' hangin' around theah, I'm goin' to the Bar Circle an' bring that wench heah myself!"

Another murmur. An admiring murmur.

"Them ——— fools said a dozen men jumped 'em? Like hell! Theah wasn't more'n two men at th' ranch! The rest of 'em are still huntin' Steve! I'll bring Lucy heah, an' you'll do just what I say as long as y'want to have her live. An' if y'try to doublecross me. . . ."

He stopped. His chair scraped.

"If y'do," he roared, "I'll make y'beg me on y'knees to kill her! *I'll—make—y'beg—me—t'kill her!*"

Steve's hand on Miguel's shoulder closed so savagely that a gasp of pain was wrenched from him. Steve's face was a mask of pure fury. His eyes were burning flames. But his brain was racing with clockwork precision. Before he could get the door beside him opened—with two men leaning against it—there would be a dozen guns out and trained on it. There were no windows on this side of the shack. And if he left Miguel, Miguel would howl. Only the utter paralysis of completest terror held him silent now.

"Slim!" barked Swain. "Pete! Kid! Watch this fella! Th' rest of you—*venga conmigo!*"

Steve rushed. A howl of terror burst from Miguel as the grip on him was released. Steve went tearing around the corner, his guns out and killing in his heart. The threats against Lucy to bend Oliver to Swain's will. . . .

He stopped with a growl of rage. The shack that was used as a bunk house was nowhere far from the cliffside. Here it touched the sheer wall. It would be waste of time to try to climb. Steve turned, and went raging to go the other way while he panted curses.

He rounded the corner of the shack quite forty feet from the door, and Swain and his followers were all of sixty yards away and no more than a blurred mass in the densest shadow of the cliff wall. To fire into the bunch would be merely to waste lead and throw away what slight chance of usefulness remained to him.

Steve did not reason that out consciously. On the contrary, he came to himself much later, when he was running desperately in the attempt to overtake them on foot, and holding his fire from pure instinct.

He saw the knot of men and horses go loping into the circle of firelight that now spread out from a leaping blaze by the entrance

way. The fire was to guard against his own escape. The riders, with Swain at their head, swept past the fire all of three hundred yards from Steve, and not one of them was exposed to his guns for more than a matter of seconds. The last of them plunged into the blackness of the passage as Steve discovered the futility of his attempt at pursuit.

He drew up, panting and wild with rage. His guns, in his hands, were no better than so many playthings. A group of the denizens of Hell Sink were on their way to kidnap Lucy. . . .

"I've got to beat 'em to it," drawled Steve in icy coolness. "Which means a horse an' a bust-through fight. An' some help wouldn't be bad."

He ran swiftly toward the fence which divided the Sink into two parts. He went hunting for Duke. He'd freed the big black horse deliberately, in case he had to whistle for him to come, but he didn't want to whistle now. He found Duke, though, staring in the direction in which he'd seen Steve depart. He bared his teeth at the approaching figure until he recognized his master. Then he whickered. Close beside him was Oliver's pinto horse.

Steve caught the pinto, hesitated, and flung its reins over Duke's saddle-horn.

"Five to one is bad odds," he said grimly, "but five to two ain't nearly so bad. I'll get 'im."

Knowing where the two horses were, he went over the fence once more. To the shack again. And he flicked open the door without warning, stepped inside, and said succinctly:

"Stick 'em up!"

Two men obeyed. A third was engaged in completing the tying-up of Oliver. He swung around, startled, and his arms shot skyward as Steve's left-hand gun waved suggestively toward him. The fourth tumbled out of a bunk with his gun swinging into line. His shot and Steve's sounded almost together—but Steve's gun was again covering the three remaining men an instant later, while the man who had fired at him was lying quite still on the floor.

"Untie Oliver," drawled Steve. "Us Galts got to stick together."

The man who obeyed worked fast. Steve's single shot was a powerful argument for obedience and haste.

"Take his gun, Oliver," said Steve. "An' tie him up. Him an' the others."

Oliver obeyed, trembling.

"Steve," he gasped. "They've gone—for——"

"Lucy," finished Steve coolly. "Yeah. I heard 'em. Now we' goin' after them. Come on!"

It was he who took the lead, now. The guns from the four men in the shack they carried with them. They made swiftly for the fence, scrambled over it, and mounted. Duke seemed glad to see Steve again.

"Now listen, Oliver," drawled Steve. "Maybe both of us won't get through here. This's what's got to be done." He explained in a level, unemotional tone, just what had to be done. "An' remember, Lucy don't have to know who killed her pa. Us Galts can stick together some ways. Even the black sheep of the family can see that."

The two horses dug their hoofs into the turf, spurted forward, and soared together over the fence. The fire by the entrance served an admirable purpose in guiding them. They landed with simultaneous thumpings on the soft earth beyond the barrier. There they swerved, one to the right and the other to the left, and galloped away to invisibility in the darkness.

The thudding of hoofs was plainly audible. There had been one shot in the bunk house. The guards at the entrance were plainly alarmed and alert. There was the glitter of firelight on polished steel. . . .

Then there was a thin, defiant yell from far away. Then the staccato clatter of a horse's hoofs on rock. Oliver had reached his agreed post and was coming on. Steve let out a wild whoop and touched Duke with the spur. Duke bounded forward, mane flying, hoofs crackling on fragments of rotted detritus rolled outward from the cliff's base. He went racing for the fire at the topmost speed of which he was capable.

One man against five is very bad odds, but two against five is far from being so desperate. And the tactics Steve and Oliver now used were designed to make the most of the fact that they were two. There was a little carmine spark, followed by a spiteful crack. Oliver's gun. It was answered by a volley. But Oliver, like Steve before him and Swain and his men before that, was keeping to the deepest shadow of all; the abysmal black that hung about the cliff's sides' lower edge. The hoofs of the pinto horse kept on.

Steve, on Duke, was going like a whirlwind too. There were five men at the passage mouth, to guard against Steve forcing his way out of Hell Sink. A great fire was kept up to make a target of him when he should try. But now two men were racing for the firelight, from diametrically opposite directions, and both men were coming shooting. The unexpectedness of the maneuver and the

difficulty of adjustment to meet it cut down the effectiveness of the five by a great deal.

They began to shoot, aiming at the sound of the running horses, or more often, at spots where iron-shod hoofs had struck sparks from stones beneath them. And their gun-flashes marked them down to the two riders.

They came into the first faint glow of the firelight at the same instant. Two men, bent low in their saddles, their guns out and bellowing when the firelight suddenly tinted their mounts with its carmine glow. The pinto horse was racing for the fire, its legs twinkling and its eyes rolling. Duke — coal-black and the fire glistening on his satiny coat—came into view like dark thunder. In mighty bounds he rushed upon the defenders of the pass, and from either side of his head it seemed that solid streams of fire poured forth. Steve's guns drenching with lead the spots from which gun flashes had previously come.

It happened in seconds. Two horses, plunging out of the dark with ruddy light beating upon them. Spouts of fire from the men in their saddles. The clattering roar of hoofs and the sustained, snarling bark of guns.

A man screamed as a horse went over him. The sound of the guns became sepulchral and resonant. . . .

Then Duke and the pinto horse went thunderously down the narrow way with the little lane of stars overhead and reverberating echoes on either side. Steve was not smiling now. His features were set and grim. He was reloading swiftly. He heard the other horse following with sturdy strides, and he did not think to worry about Oliver. He was solely concerned with getting back to the Bar Circle, with organizing a defense or arranging Lucy's quick departure before the men from Hell Sink swooped down upon her. . . .

A gun went off deafeningly in the blackness. The watcher of the way. Steve sent a literal flood of lead in reply. The air seemed full of flying rock-fragments and whistling, screaming slugs of metal that had been bullets until they struck unyielding stone. Oliver did not fire, but the pinto horse came on steadily. On and on, galloping through sheer opacity. . . .

Suddenly, the open air, with cattle grazing somewhere near and raising long white faces to stare stupidly at the two horses. Steve's guns glittered in the starlight. He watched for the night-herds. There were none.

"They rode off with Swain," said Steve grimly. "Come on, Oliver.

Swain's got enough men to wipe out the whole Bar Circle if he takes 'em by surprise."

Thundering, racing onward, with the pinto horse following swiftly behind. Steve did not notice that Oliver did not speak at all. He heard the horse and felt the presence of the rider. That was all. Steve was thinking desperately that Swain and his hands would have a good start. A quarter of an hour anyhow. Maybe more. Probably more. They would have as imperative a need for speed as those behind them. Swain knew that the Bar Circle should be deserted. Its riders should not yet have returned from their hunt for Steve. But even so it was a daring and even a desperate undertaking to swoop out of the hills to kidnap Lucy under the very noses of her men. Swain needed her to force Oliver to his will. Because Oliver could spoil the game by talking freely. But that was not enough. . . . Steve's Uncle Peter?

Swain would be hurrying, though. And with the start he had, and the greater familiarity of his mounts with the trail, he should make better time. Steve and Oliver would reach the Bar Circle too late. . . .

Steve swore in a cold and even voice. All these items meant together seemed to mean that he and Oliver were committing suicide. They could ride up to, into, and possibly through the crowd of Hell Sink men. They would have the advantage of surprise, perhaps. They were both supposed to be prisoners, unable to make any such attempt to spoil Swain's plans. But there would be the two of them only against all the men with which Swain had started out, and he had added the night-herd riders to his force. It all amounted to two men against at least a dozen and a half.

An idea, a rather desperate one, came into Steve's head. He reined in, not to lose speed but to allow Oliver to come alongside.

"Look here, Oliver," he said crisply, "if we catch up to those fellas, whether before or after they raid the Bar Circle, we ride quietly in amongst the hindmost. An' we pick 'em off one by one."

That could be done. A party of horsemen making haste will not ride as a compact mass, but with the slower horses behind. Inevitably there will be stragglers. Inevitably, however compact the leading group, there will be other riders trailing by tens or even hundreds of yards. And even the rearmost straggler, especially at night, can never be sure that there is not another member of his own party behind him. The two riders coming up from behind, if they showed no signs of hostility, might pinch off the tail-end man, and then the next, and the next. . . . With each man disposed

of the risk would become greater, but it was not beyond possibility that they might unsaddle half the Hell Sink gang before it came to shooting it out against the remainder.

"You get it, Oliver?" asked Steve crisply. "Pick 'em off, one by one, as we catch up to 'em?"

There was no reply. And Steve saw Oliver reel in his saddle. He had the saddle horn clutched fast. He was bent low over it. But he lurched slowly, now one way—and recovered slowly—and now the other. . . .

Steve heard him sob, suddenly, like a man whose heart has broken in his breast. And then he fell slowly, with even a seeming deliberation, out of the saddle. The pinto checked and reared as its rider went crashing to the earth. Then it stood still, trembling.

Steve was on the ground in an instant. He saw the whites of his cousin's eyes as Oliver searched desperately for him in the darkness.

"I'm here," said Steve briefly.

"I—got hit," gasped Oliver. "By—the—fire—as we came through. I—I thought—I could get killed—fighting—for Lucy. . . ." He sobbed again. "I wanted—to do something—right."

"You've done it," said Steve quietly. "Us Galts are generally all right at bottom."

"I—didn't tell you everything, Steve," gasped his cousin. "E-even you'd have killed me." He fought for strength. "If—you're—too late at the Bar Circle, Swain'll wait till morning—before he harms—Lucy. He'll—think I just—tried to break away again. 'Done it before. Couldn't stick it out. Something rotten in me, I guess, Steve. I should have been the black sheep. Get a posse and raid Hell Sink—I'm going. . . ."

He seemed to choke a little. He was still.

Steve watched grimly for the fraction of a second. He had turned to remount when he heard the faintest of whispers.

"Now I lay me. . . . God, I'm sorry I killed Lucy's fa——"

Steve, all grimness and cold composure, felt his heart when the voice died away again. It had stopped.

Steve remounted.

"If I see daylight, Duke," he said evenly as Duke pounded madly ahead at the touch of the spurs, "if I see daylight, I'll come back here an' see he gets buried right. But if I don't——"

He bent low in the saddle.

"Shake a hoof, Duke! Show me some speed! We' got doin's to do!"

And then there was but a single horse going swiftly through the

darkness and awakening the echoes of the hills with thunderous poundings of his hoofs on rock.

Down the last incline. . . . Breasting sage and mesquite on the rolling open range. Minutes of breathless rushing through the cool and starlit night. Aeons of strained eyes and acutely listening ears, questing the semblance of an indication of other riders ahead. . . .

And then a glow of light in the distance. The faintest flicker of a single lamp, a long distance off. The Bar Circle.

Steve sent Duke toward it, calling upon him for the last ounce of strength for the making of speed. Now was the time for recklessness, for the casting aside of all considerations but the necessity of getting to the Bar Circle at the earliest conceivable instant. Somehow, though Steve expected at any instant to hear the crackling of firearms—meaning that Swain's raiding party had reached the ranch before him—somehow the stillness and quietness reassured him.

Half a mile away, he emptied a gun into the air. As he rushed on, he began to shout:

"Lucy! Lucy! Steve comin'! Get a horse! Hurry! Quick!"

Over and over he shouted it. There was no answer. No sign of a movement. No obscuring of the single light that would have told him that someone heard and was moving about within.

Duke flung himself gallantly through the blackness. Steve, shouting madly, leaped the house fence and thundered up to the ranch house porch. Silence. Stillness.

"Lucy! Lucy!"

The door was open—the same door from which he had come out laughing to rout the first attempt of the Hell Sink gang to kidnap Lucy. There was a sudden horrible air of emptiness. . . .

With a ghastly feeling of importance, Steve flung himself from the saddle. He pushed the door wider. He went in. In the room where the light still glowed he saw Jud Williams lying on the floor. He had been shot through the head. A chair had been overturned, as if in a struggle.

Of Lucy there was no sign at all.

CHAPTER IX

THE thudding of hoofs made itself heard presently, coming from the westward. It began as a sort of murmur, so faint that Steve did not hear it begin. He only knew that it had grown louder. As

he listened, tight-lipped, it grew louder still. It was not a dramatic sound. The tempo of the hoofs was slow, was funereal. There were many animals, all iron-shod, in the group which approached the ranch house. And every one came on at a slow, reluctant walk.

It could not be the gang from Hell Sink. Lucy was gone and Jud Williams dead, and they would not have come so slowly nor so openly either. It could not be a posse. They would not come at this crawling pace. It could not be anybody but the Bar Circle hands, who had defied Lucy's orders forbidding them to go into town to lynch Steve and had been locked in the jail themselves in consequence of their effort. On their escape they had made a raging and entirely futile attempt to find Steve at the only other place they knew of where he might go—to Miguel's little bolt-hole cabin on the edge of the hills. Now they came back to the Bar Circle, baffled and resentful and uneasy.

Steve listened. His nostrils were distended. His whole chest was filled with a physical pain that came solely from the fact of Lucy's kidnapping. And he was hopeless. These men, who could help him fight for Lucy, instead would kill him on sight. They would not wait to listen. And they must listen!

Steve stood rigid, in the room where Jud Williams lay dead upon the floor. He knew how impossible his next task was. But somehow his mind did not linger on that phase of it. He had to get men to help him to raid Hell Sink. He had until sunrise, no longer. Here were men. These men had to do. So he ignored the fact that he could not convince and could not enlist them. He bent all his energies to the contrivance of a way to do it.

For one minute, two, three, he stood silent and frozen in his pose of listening. His brain raced frantically among a myraid absurd schemes. Then, quite suddenly, he moved. He moved fast. To the tool house. To the bunk house. There was the sound of hammering. Then no noise at all.

Wearily, slowly, sepulchrally, the calvacade neared the ranch house. The men were morosely silent. They seemed to edge a little away from the ranch house with its solitary light. They halted uncertainly outside the bunk house. Their knowledge of events had ceased with Steve's escape from the jail. They waited uncomfortably for some word from the girl—their employer—whom they had defied when they rode out to kill Steve. But there was no sign of life from the house. Men fidgeted.

"Maybe we' fired, boys," observed one grimly. "We' better not unsaddle till we heah."

There was a moment's hesitation.

"She'll send Jud over to the bunk house. I—uh—I ain't anxious to have her ask us what we done."

Tacitly, the statement was accepted and approved. Men dismounted stiffly, dropped their horses' reins over their heads, and moved toward the bunk house. There were few comments. None, in fact. Every man felt that his job might be gone. Every man felt that he would not regret his job if, previously, he could have had a hand in Steve Galt's lynching. But Steve had slipped out of their hands, and the ignominy of being locked in the jail while he rode peacefully away still rankled.

Someone opened the bunk house door. One by one, the riders drifted inside.

In the blackness of the interior someone struck a match, disclosing all the boarded interior, the bunks against the wall, the occasional magazine picture tacked against the planking. . . . The man with the match lighted the lamp very carefully. The others were restlessly silent.

The chimney went back on the lamp. At the sudden brightening of its flame Steve spoke.

"Say, you fellas!" He drawled it. Coldly. Grimly. "I wish you'd call in the others. I' got somethin' to say."

There was an instant's silence, born of sheer incredulity. Those in the bunk house stared at Steve, jaws falling open in blank unbelief that Steve actually sat before then, puffing quietly on a cigarette which until the lighting of the lamp he had held cupped behind his hand.

As one man, every Bar Circle man in the place dropped his hand to his hip.

"Call in the other fellas," drawled Steve again. "I' got somethin' to say."

He made no movement toward his own guns, but the tautness of his lips and the tightness with which his jaw was clamped was proof that he was not as indifferent as his pose would have suggested.

"———!" gasped somebody. "Hey! Fellas! Steve Galt's heah!"

The door was instantly jammed by bodies forcing their way in. There were a dozen guns out, now, and every one bearing on Steve. He puffed steadily, regarding the lot of them with a peculiar grim calmness. It wasn't desperation. Somehow, it suggested an ace up his sleeve. But they did not notice that.

"You'd better listen to me," he drawled. "You' got me covered,

an' Gawd knows I didn't have to wait for you-all to come an' find me! Likewise, I coulda done a lot o' shootin' as you-all came in the door."

"Listen, hell!" snarled somebody. "Y'killed Hamby an' the Sheriff tonight, an' Dick Harrison before——"

"No," drawled Steve. "I' been doin' some shootin' tonight, an' maybe I killed somebody. I tried, right earnest. But I didn't kill those three men." He paused. "I did my shootin'," he drawled deliberately, "in Hell Sink. Rustlin' headquarters."

There was a stirring. Then a savage:

"Get a rope——"

"Wait a minute," said Steve deliberately. "You got your guns on me. You can pull the triggers when you like. I' got somethin' to say. I want to tell you, first, how cattle've been rustled around here. Bar Circle cattle."

He returned his cigarette to his mouth and began to roll another, unhurriedly.

"In rustlin' from the Bar Circle," he drawled, "the first thing to do is get the cattle away. This range, thank Gawd, ain't yet got to the stage of bein' fenced in. There are plenty of Bar Circle cows on Block H land, an' Block H cows on Bar Circle ground. Likewise there are Block H cows on the Lazy C an' Crazy Fork range too. In little bunches, two-three head. Maybe ten or twelve. Not enough to risk stealin'. But they get stolen."

He paused to lick the new cigarette. If he told them, now, that Lucy had been kidnapped, they would kill him.

"I'll tell you how they get stolen," he went on evenly. "There's a ranch around here where those cattle get rebranded. You fellas have been drivin' your own cattle, with blotted brands, for a neighbor——"

"He's talkin' for time," said someone curtly. "That don't make sense. Get a rope——"

"It does make sense," said Steve gently. "I'm pointin' out that my Uncle Peter, he's bought some Double Wheel stock—an' a Bar Circle makes a right good Double Wheel. He's bought, maybe, a coupla hundred Double Wheel cows. But he's running five or six hundred head Double Wheel vented an' rebranded Block H."

That got their attention. He could see their faces change as it worked itself out in their minds.

"Hells bells!" gasped somebody. "Maybe it's the truth! Theah' a hell of a lot of them rebranded cattle. . . ."

There was a buzz of talk. But few eyes turned away from Steve, and no guns at all came down.

"Howcome y'tellin'?" demanded a tall man, grimly. "Hadda fuss with y'gang?"

"They ain't my gang," Steve said gently. "Me an' my cousin Oliver, we shot our way out through part of 'em just now, me hurryin' here."

"Supposin' you tell us," suggested the tall man, as grimly as before, "just how to fin' this Hell Sink you say is rustlin' headquarters. Maybe what you' tellin' is the truth, an' maybe it ain't. But it is the truth that you killed three men lately an' we been huntin' all over for yuh——"

"To lynch me," agreed Steve evenly. "Yeah. Well, this's the way to get to Hell Sink."

He told them, explicitly. There was an instant savage growl.

"It's a dam' lie," snapped the tall man. "I' been by theah a dozen times. Theah ain't no openin' wheah you say a-tall! Swain usual has a bunch o' cows grazin' in Big Valley. Y'lyin'! Somebody get a rope——"

"Lyin' or not," said Steve evenly, "Lucy's theah. Swain took her theah maybe half an hour ago."

He lit his fresh cigarette from the butt of the old one as his flat statement sank home and stopped the angry humming sound about him. It made dead silence fall as abruptly as if a hand had been clapped simultaneously over every man's mouth. Then there was an outburst which was practically a roar.

"What y'tellin' us? Why, y'dam' fool—— 'Think we'll believe that?"

It was a growling, snarling tumult. Someone plunged outside and came back with a rope. Guns bore steadily upon Steve.

"Jud Williams," said Steve quietly, "is lyin' on the sittin'-room floor with a bullet in his head. There are a coupla chairs turned over, like Lucy put up a scrap. Go an' look!"

The quietness, the positiveness of his tone carried enough of conviction to be momentarily staggering. The bunk house became a bedlam. Half the men in the place wanted to go and see. The other half wanted to lynch Steve first. And those who wanted to go and see were only deterred by their determination not to go if Steve was going to be killed in their absence. They wanted to be on hand when that happened.

Steve watched them with coldly flaming eyes. He was in a passion of impatience. He was cold all over with the thought of what might be happening to Lucy while he delayed. But if he had told these men at the outset that Lucy had been carried off,

there was no power on earth that could have kept them from killing him instantly as the author of that disaster. He had been forced to delay, to try to convince them by an explanation of the rustling scheme; to gain some sort of hold upon their ability to believe. He had to have men to fight with him. He had to have these men. And he had to convince them somehow. . . .

Three men plunged out of the door to look in the ranch house. The bedlam in the bunk house continued.

"I tell yuh," roared the tall man, "he's lyin'! It's some scheme o' hisn'. He wants to git us away from heah so his gang can come in an' clean up th' whole range ——"

One of the three men came back, choking on his wrath.

"It's so!" he gasped. "Jud's dead an' Miss Lucy's gone, an' heah's one ——— ——— ——— of a murderer that's goin' too!"

Somebody caught his arm.

"No y'don't!" was the roar. "If he killed her, we' all goin' to have a han' in killin' him! Heah! The rope ——"

Steve stood up.

"You fools!' he cried bitterly, "you dam' fools! Don't you see what I'm tryin' to do? Lucy's in Hell Sink! I just came from there! I'm askin' you to come with me an' get her out! By mornin'—my Gawd! Think what might happen to her before mornin'! I'll go with you! I'll let you take me with a rope around my neck! I'll hang, an' thank you, if only you get her out first ——"

The other two men came back from the ranch house, white-faced and with burning eyes.

"Let me get at him!" panted the first. "He killed her pa, an' now he's ——"

The second was moving toward Steve without a word, his hands working convulsively.

Steve stepped back a pace. A box that his body had hidden was revealed—a mate to the box that had been taken in to Tres Piños to blow down the jail door. *"DYNAMITE! DANGER!"*

"Now stan' back," snapped Steve savagely. "By Gawd, I came here to get me a posse. I've got authority from the Sheriff. I'm a deputy sheriff of this county! Here's my 'thority!" He flung the scribbled paper the Sheriff had given him, across the room. "I deputize you fellas to help me clear up Hell Sink! Who's comin' peaceable? You' comin', by Gawd! I came here for a posse, an' I'm goin' to get one if I have to carry you there roped to your horses!"

He stood tense, outlined in the lamplight, his fingers holding the glowing tip of his cigarette over the box of explosive.

"Shoot!" he said grimly, "an' this cigarette will drop on a pile o' fuse! You fellas are goin' to follow me to Hell Sink, or you'll follow me to hell!"

A growl, a roar of rage came from the men who faced him. Steve picked up the box, still holding his cigarette above its contents.

"I'm goin' outside," he drawled coldly. "I'll wait for volunteers for my posse. If they don't come, I rec'n I'll toss a coupla sticks o' dynamite back in here!"

Box in hand, cigarette glowing, he moved toward the door. Men drew back, snarling, to let him pass. There were a dozen men in the bunk house, and any one of them could have shot him. Every one of them longed desperately to kill him. Gun muzzles followed his every movement, and men sobbed with rage, with a consuming hatred. But though fingers trembled upon triggers, there was that certainty of a flaming, instant death to follow any shot. Men cursed him, and hated him, and would have risked death a dozen times over to kill him. But no man was quite prepared to commit suicide to make sure that Steve did not escape.

Steve reached the door and backed out of it, smiling ironically though his eyes were burning flames.

He vanished from their sight.

"Th' windows!" panted the tall man. "We c'n rush 'im ——"

There were thuds. Men's bodies hurled themselves at the separate windows in a blood-thirsty, simultaneous rush. Then roars of rage as they resisted. The stout wooden shutters outside were shut fast and apparently nailed shut past the possibility of being forced. Huge spikes, indeed, showed where they had been nailed.

"You boys can quit that when you' tired," came Steve's cool voice outside. "One o' you come out. Just one."

A moment's impotent rebellion. Whispers.

"One man," repeated Steve coldly, "or I throw a stick of dynamite in there—with the fuse lighted!"

Strangling with rage, one man hurtled out the door, his gun out and ready.

A shot boomed instantly. The men remaining made a blood-lustful sound. But no cry of triumph came from their companion. Instead:

"Right bad manners," Steve drawled, outside. "Stan' up an' let me take y' gun. . . ."

Two more men rushed, and two more shots boomed. One of the two fell back inside.

"I think," drawled Steve, "I think he's creased. But maybe I killed him. He made me hurry some."

The sound of movement, outside. The slithering sound of ropes.

The tall man whispered, panting with rage:

"All of us, shootin' at once ——"

The volley went off thunderously. The door was splintered by the bullets. There was silence for a little space. Men held their breaths, savagely waiting to hear a groan or the sound of a fall. But then Steve said grimly:

"If you fellas try that again I'll show you some action! I'm busy! I ain't got time for this foolin'! I'm a deputy sheriff an' I need a posse an' you're it! Next, now," he added dryly. "I'm all set for another customer."

There were howling, raging defiances from within. The Bar Circle men thirsted for Steve's blood. To submit tamely, one by one, to capture by the man they had ridden so many miles to lynch was too much. They howled their refusal.

There was a scraping bump on the edge of the bunk house roof. Then Steve's voice again.

"Your friends out here will tell you that I just put the dynamite box up on the roof. I'm lightin' a time fuse now. If you-all ain't out when it goes off, it'll be your funeral, not mine. But come one at a time!"

There was dense blackness outside the bunk house, in which certain prone objects kicked and cursed unavailingly. But now a sudden unanimity came into their enraged utterances. Despairing, almost tearful howls testified to the truth of what Steve had said. And the men inside the bunk house heard and were forced to believe.

Steve himself was invisible. A man came out, apoplectic with fury. He was tied up, swearing. Another. . . . Another. . . .

Each man came out hopeful of getting a shot at Steve. Each man was willing to risk his life ten times over to get a shot at him. Each man, coming from the lighted bunk house, found a gun stuck in his ribs before he had ceased to be as blind as a bat, and found himself swiftly being rendered helpless.

And above the heads of the bound men, a little fuse sputtered and fizzed agitatedly. Those who were most recently bound were too full of wrath to notice it. They filled the air with sulphurous language until ever-mounting rage made them speechless. Each man had had a private little trick with which he had hoped to

get Steve. And each man had been covered too promptly and bound too expeditiously for his little trick to work.

"Next," drawled Steve. "I ain't but one barber, but there ain't any waitin'. Come on out!"

"Come in an' get me!" snarled a last, defiant voice from the interior.

There was a smashing sound and the tinkling of broken glass. The inside of the bunk house was in darkness.

Steve waited.

"Comin' out?" he asked mildly.

The answer was a veritable triumph of insult, to which Steve listened unmoved. He even smiled faintly.

"I'll shoot it out with you for what you called me," he drawled, "but after this affair of tonight is done with. Meanwhile, maybe your friends can persuade you t' come out. Time's gettin' short. The fuse is burnin' steady, fella!"

The bound and swearing men on the ground looked up at the sputtering fuse. It was inches only away from the box. Steve struck a match to let them see it.

"If it goes off," he observed, "besides messin' up the bunk house, it's likely to do some damage to you fellas."

Growls of rage answered him. Then roared imprecations. But Steve was unmoved. One man to be left behind would not make so much difference in Hell Sink, perhaps, but one man armed and mounted in his rear would make it impossible for him to reach Hell Sink with his unwilling posse. He said inexorably:

"Come out, fella, before it's too late! You can't come out when you're separated into a lot of different pieces!"

A bound man snarled from the ground:

"C'mon out, damn yuh, Sam! Th' ———'s crazy enough to let it go off. We'll kill 'im later. But come on out or he'll blow us to hell!"

A figure catapulted from the doorway. Steve plunged to meet it. Guns, meeting and clattering together, struck sparks in the darkness. And then, quite suddenly, there were not two figures but one writhing mass that was two men in the most deadly of battles.

Steve fought in savage silence. Not only his own life but Lucy's hung on the issue of this battle with a man who would have died to serve Lucy—who, as a matter of fact, was putting forth his last ounce of strength to begin her avenging. The other man's gun was lost. And Steve, his own gun held fast despite his antagonist's

struggle to wrench it away, could not use it because he needed this man to help him fight, later.

Over and over on the ground, striking savage and merciless blows at the shortest of short range. Using every trick, fair and foul, that the roughest of rough-and-tumble fighting could condone. The only sound was the gasping of their breaths. They reeled over the prone figures of the bound men, who stared upward hungrily and yelled encouragement to Steve's adversary. They fell with a crash upon a man who was straining his eyes to see the battle, and would have sunk his teeth in Steve's flesh had he known which flesh was Steve's. The two battling men strained and heaved and struck and gasped for breath, but the helpless men yapped like hungry wolves for Steve's defeat.

An then, rolling upon the prostrate figures, exerting every atom of their strength in a last, titantic effort—blows went home with sickening impacts—there were hoarse gaspings ——

They crashed against the building's side and were lost to view in the abysmal shadows below the bunk house's overhanging eaves. There the battle continued for ten seconds—fifteen ——

Then from the midst of the writhing, gasping tumult there came a sharp, incisive *"Crack!"*

A figure staggered away from the scene of conflict. The figure reached up to the sputtering fuse. As its fingers were illuminated by the little sparkles of light, the end of the time fuse came. The instantaneous fuse flashed up brilliantly. . . .

The fuse jerked loose and went flaming through the air. It was blindingly bright.

"An' thus," said Steve, panting, "thus endeth the first lesson!"

He leaned against the bunk house for a moment to get back his breath. Presently he said, still panting:

"You-all are now, gentlemen, a posse under the orders of a duly authorized deputy sheriff of this county. You have power to go, look, see an' make arrests, an' even use such force as may be necessary for the maintenance of the peace an' dignity of our sovereign state. It is an honor to serve the state. I hope you appreciate it. I'm goin' to rope you in your saddles."

He moved away. The trampling of horses' hoofs followed him on his return.

"Right thoughtful of you-all not to unsaddle," he observed grimly. "It saves time, an' you cost me plenty! Here, fella!"

He jerked a man to his feet. He fumbled with a rope for a moment or two, and then cut loose his ankles.

"Get on board your horse," he ordered. "If you try to duck away, please notice I' got a rope around your neck an' I'll jerk you off again."

The man mounted, swearing with exhausted passion.

"Another one, please," said Steve grimly. "I came here for a posse. I'm getttin' me one. You, suh, if you please!"

Another man jerked to his feet, two half-hitches taken around his neck and the bonds about his ankles slashed in two. Steve flung him up in the saddle.

"An' another one," he said coolly. "Restrain yourselves, gents. As official deputy sheriff, I'm supposed to ride at the head of this party."

One by one—grimly, desperately alert—he fastened ropes about his captives' necks, mounted them, and spread them out in a line of mounted men, each one a little more than ten feet from the next man ahead of him and the same distance from the man behind. There were an even dozen Bar Circle men.

"I'm takin' your guns along," he observed grimly. "Now listen! Lucy Harrison was carried off by Swain better'n an hour ago. I've got reason to believe she's safe till daylight, but not a second after, an' it ain't good reason at that. I'm takin' you fellas to where you can be convinced I ain't lyin'. Then I'm goin' to give you your guns. Meantime, any man that tries to bust up this posse gets hell blown outa him!"

He slung a sack over Duke's back and mounted. The sack was heavy and lumpy. It contained the guns he had taken from the men who now followed him, blaspheming. And Steve spurred into position, knotted an essential rope to his saddle-horn, and began assuredly the most peculiar parade of a deputy sheriff and his posse that ever wound across a cow man's range.

Steve was in the lead, smoking a cigarette whose glow now and again disclosed the curiously bitter smile upon his lips. Ten feet behind him a man rode with his hands behind his back, a rope around his neck, and with his holsters empty. Ten feet further there was a second man in similar case. Ten feet more, a third, and so on.

The cavalcade was a long one. Steve had used up four lariats for his leading-rope alone. He was taking a dozen men to be his posse. Their guns he carried in a sack. Every man hated him. And every man cursed him venomously as they rode.

And Steve, who saw no chance whatever of his living to see the sun rise again, and who now was preparing with a curious bitter

amusement merely to see that Lucy was safe before he was killed; Steve rode, and smoked, and drove his mind frantically from the thought of what might have happened in Hell Sink before he could get there with these men.

Once inside, he knew they would fight. They would fight the real rustlers as savagely as they had tried to fight him. They might even accept his leadership during the fighting. But after it they would very probably kill him for the murders they thought he had committed.

That didn't matter. What did matter was that the necessity of taking Lucy's rescuers to the scene of her danger as prisoners, was bound to cut down their speed. Swain had made better time than Steve from Hell Sink to the Bar Circle, because he was more familiar with the ground. He would make vastly better time on the way back, because though one man will ordinarily travel faster than a dozen, a dozen tied together will relatively crawl.

The strange cavalcade went on through the darkness at a slow jog-trot. Behind it trailed a cloud which was partly dust and partly the sulphurous language of the riders. It went steadily across the level range, then the gently undulating ground that preceded the hills, and then it vanished into a defile that led into their fastnesses. Here, Steve watched the way before him with the strained attention of a hawk. It was just barely possible that Swain, sweeping back to his stronghold after his successful raid, had left a man or so as rear guard, to give warning by gunfire of any possible pursuit.

But none disclosed themselves. Steve had left the Bar Circle nearly an hour after Swain's raid, with his helpless aides. He had lost more time in the necessarily slower journeying of his troop. If Swain had left watchers behind him, they had become assured of the absence of pursuit and had gone on to their headquarters. There was no alarm as Steve's long string of helplessly cursing men wound their way through the hills—sometimes at a snail's pace where the going was bad and the slipping of a horse would be especially disastrous, and sometimes at a fairly brisk rate.

They went past the place where Hamby had been killed, and here Steve reined in.

"You fellas," he said evenly, "prob'ly think I'm either crazy or aimin' to murder the lot of you. But I'm tellin' you. About two miles on we come to Swain's lookouts. Block H men, ridin' night-herd on Block H cows. If they give the alarm an' find out how I' got you fellas tied up, there ain't a chance in Gawd's world of me

gettin' you loose an' givin' you your guns in time for you to fight clear, let alone doin' anything for Lucy. So ——"

He rode along the line, inspecting the bonds on each man's wrist's. As he found each secure, he slipped guns in their holsters.

"I don't give a damn what you think," he said grimly. I'm goin' to take you in Hell Sink, turn y'loose—an' I advise you to follow me. I'm goin' to be headin' for where Lucy is."

He returned to his place at the head of the line. But the profanity behind him died down peculiarly. His prisoners felt the comforting weight of guns on their hips. Their hands were still bound, it was true, but by sufficient twisting the guns might be gotten at.

The main reason for the sudden silence, though, was bewilderment. Steve had had them helpless. They were still very much handicapped in any sort of struggle. But he had re-armed them!

He led them down the last narrow gully into the broad valley from which the entrance to Hell Sink led away. Big Valley. Cattle grazed all about them. Whitish blurs that were the faces of cud-chewing cows or steers moved vaguely to look at them, and then amid gruntings and heavings rose up upon cloven hoofs and lumbered away. Far away a thin tenor voice rose in the night air. A night-herd, riding his rounds according to recent local custom—a Block H man with all the appearance of lawful occasion, guarding the entrance to the rustlers' hangout.

His horse came thudding toward them. The singing stopped abruptly. The rider loomed up.

"Howdy! Who's theah?"

His voice was harsh with suspicion.

Steve tilted back his hat.

"This here," he drawled, "is the Bar Circle on the warpath ——"

"*BANG!*" Steve's hat flipped from his head and toppled to the ground. The other rider had whirled about and was streaking it away. Duke reared up, and crimson flames poured from Steve's guns as he fired after the fleeing figure.

"I rec'n," said Steve grimly, lowering his weapons. "I rec'n that's exhibit one. Now come on!"

He went on, dragging his train behind him. Profanity began to rise from the long string of men again. But this time it was a different sort of profanity. It was awestruck and astounded and suddenly filled with rage which not directed against Steve.

Shrill whistles sounded. Many short blasts close together. They

were answered and repeated hollowly from somewhere within the hills.

"There's warnin' we are on our way," said Steve dryly. 'Are you fellas beginnin' to be convinced now?" He rode at the rocky wall. He checked, and stared to right and left. . . . There was no gap in the wall. None whatever. Yet this was where he had ridden in with Oliver. . . .

There was a babbling in Spanish from some invisible person nearby. Then from nowhere a horse and rider were suddenly silhouetted against the light rock of the cliff.

"Miguel," said Steve icily, "if you want to live ——"

"Madre santissima!" panted the newly-visible rider in the ultimate of panic, *"Estebanito!—Por el amor de ——"*

"Where's the openin'?" drawled Steve.

"Aqui, Estebanito! Aqui!" Miguel's teeth chattered. He slobbered in glassy-eyed terror. "I—I was runneeng away, *Estebanito.* I—I am not evil like these men. The—the *Señor* Swain, 'ee has breeng the *Señorita* Lucy—an' he swear . . . ."

Miguel babbled in dobie Spanish, sweating. He was truly in a pitiable funk. He would tell anything, just then, to placate Steve and the men behind him whom he could not see to be tied.

Before Miguel had said a dozen words, a roar broke from the bound men behind Steve. They spurred their horses recklessly forward, clamoring hoarsely to be freed.

"For Gawd's sake let us loose!" panted the tall man. "Let me kill Swain! For Gawd's sake, Steve ——"

For answer, Steve slashed the rope that bound the man's wrists and thrust his knife into the suddenly freed hands. Steve's eyes were burning and like coals.

"You fellas," he said icily, "come on in as fast as you can. The law's on your side. I can't wait for you!"

Duke leaped forward. A canvas curtain, painted to match the rock on either side, gave way at the impact and fell in a tumbled mass of fabric. The opening that Steve had twice ridden through was disclosed, and furnished both proof of the existence of the almost-mythical Hell Sink, and an explanation of how men had ridden past this place many times and had never suspected its existence.

Duke extricated his feet from the entangling mass of drapery and shot into the blank opening before him. He vanished. And then the freed Bar Circle men began to stream into the opening after him, guns out, spurring madly, sobbing with hatred and mad with the lust to kill.

CHAPTER X

THERE was activity in the open space when Steve went hurtling into it. There had been activity in the narrow way. Someone had essayed to bar all passage, and gun shots had echoed deafeningly, while lurid flashes split the blackness. And at the end of the firing Steve had gone on, leaving two guards who would not try to bar the way any more.

He came out into Hell Sink like a bat out of hell, instead of into it. Duke was going like a whirlwind, and Steve was in the act of reloading when he came into view. There were fires burning, half a dozen of them, and by their light men hastily saddled horses while other still came hurriedly out of the shack that served as bunk house.

Swain's voice rose in a bellowing command.

"Saddle up!" he roared. "The game's finished, mos' likely, but we can bust through any posse they can gather an' fight clear to the Border. Saddle up! Take grub an' shells ——"

Steve opened fire at the distant target of Swain and the men about him. It was too far for a sixgun to carry true, but a horse screamed and plunged.

A Bar Circle man came streaking out of the opening behind Steve. Another. Another. . . . Puffs of smoke, curiously distinct in the bright firelight, shot from their guns. Flashes came from the rustlers. A horse went down and its rider rolled over, jumped up, and went forward on foot, still shooting. More Bar Circle men came in, every man at the utmost limit of his horse's speed. There seemed to be no end to them. Coming a few seconds apart, as they did, it seemed that there might be the whole range riding into the Sink with guns crackling to wipe out for good and all the rustling that had bled it white.

The heavier boom of rifles intermingled with the sixgun fire. Another horse went down.

"Off y'hawsses!" roared a voice. "Get to 'em on foot. . . ."

Most of the Bar Circle men obeyed. A running man on foot is not an easy target at any time. In a vast, sunken amphitheatre lighted only by flaring open fires, he is incomparably more difficult to hit. In a wide, straggling skirmish-line the Bar Circle men moved forward. As they came closer they used cover—the humps and hollows of the ground—to protect themselves from the bullets that now came whining wildly overhead.

But the Bar Circle men had one great advantage. They were the attackers, and they had the power of the law behind them. The men of Hell Sink inevitably considered that since these men had found their way into the rustlers' retreat, all the range knew of it and how to enter it. Swain's followers thought instantly and desperately of flight, and flight only. They had known that the rustling game could be carried on only so long. Once it was uncovered, flight was the only thing for any of them. They had been prepared for that flight, and now they were anxious only to begin it.

They fired wildly, saddling horses—even fighting for possession of those already saddled. The blazing fires may have been lit as a celebration. Lucy's disappearance would make the taking-over of the Bar Circle the easiest of coups. To loot that as the Block H had been looted—drain it of cattle and possibly dispose of the range itself afterward—would be comparatively simple. They had dismissed Steve and Oliver from their calculations. Oliver would come back. He would not have the nerve to tell what he knew. And Steve would be shot on sight by any man who saw him, without a chance to tell what he had learned.

It had seemed a time for celebration. And then the Bar Circle riders came thundering in, shooting savagely and with a wild rage which seemed to the rustlers to indicate an overwhelming force behind them. There was no will to battle with them. There was only the belief that a foreseen need for flight had come about.

They were so much obsessed with that need, in fact, that they fought as much to delay the Bar Circle men's advance as to defeat them, and instead of scattering to cover from which they could fight effectively, they remained by the corral where mounts were to be had for the taking.

At the corral, they were outlined by the flames. Bar Circle bullets began to find their marks. A horse wounded by a stray bullet went into a frenzy of bucking and kicking and knocked over three men who struggled to get horses for themselves amid the tumult.

Echoed from one side of the Sink to the other, the explosions of the firearms were multiplied in number. It sounded as if a hundred men were fighting instead of just about a dozen against certainly no more than twice that number.

The Bar Circle men advanced steadily, their guns pausing only to reload, and the savagery with which they fought serving admirably to make up for their lack of numbers. Three of the rustlers were down. A fourth, jumping into the saddle, caught a bullet in mid-air and fell with a crash on the other side of his horse. The animals in the corral went into a frenzy of terror. Bullets

flying about them, the hoarse screaming of one of their number which flung itself about on three legs, the shrill squealing of another with its hide nipped by a bit of flying lead. . . .

Suddenly, somehow—nobody ever knew how—half the corral fence went down. Out of the opening streamed a horde of crazy horses with two of the outlaws mounted and swept along in their midst. Other men tried frantically to seize mounts from the racing mob. . . .

A man went down under the pounding hoofs. The whole remuda went over him. . . .

And then the whole Sink was full of flying animals, racing here and there and everywhere, stirring up the brand-sore cattle and communicating to them their own panic. And suddenly the sound of gunfire redoubled.

Half a dozen, no more, of the rustlers had managed to mount before the corral fence gave way. Two of them were shot out of their saddles by the Bar Circle guns. Of the rest, one died when his horse tripped and threw him in the path of the remuda. Six of the Hell Sink men were out of the fighting altogether. But the rest, with all hope of getting horses gone, turned to the most desperate sort of defense.

A Bar Circle man crumpled up, coughing. Another grinned with his cheek laid open by a bullet, and came on shooting. A third was shooting with only one hand and reloading awkwardly when his guns shot empty.

The firelight showed them, now. They were too close for the cover which had shielded them to continue to be effective. They were closing in together, and inevitably became better targets, and they were facing a knot of men slightly more than their own number and made as desperate by terror as they were by rage. The booming of guns had become unutterably harsh and savage. It had risen to the rapidity and the rattling intensity of machine-gun fire. The rustlers stood in curiously strained, tense attitudes, etched out by the reddish light of the fire and shooting like fiends. Licking tongues of flame darted out from the muzzles of their weapons.

The Bar Circle men came on steadily, standing upright and firing with a peculiar deliberation that only the savagery of utter determination would have accounted for. One of them went down suddenly, his leg crumpled beneath him. He crawled forward grimly for a few paces. Then he rested the barrel of his sixgun in his hand and began to shoot with icy coolness into the group of rustlers still left on their feet.

And they were lessening steadily. One sank down with an expression of intense astonishment on his face. Another, his hand and nerves shattered by a single shot through the palm, blubbered hysterically and tried to shoot with his left hand. The rest were bullet-torn and in the ultimate of desperation.

And Steve —— He had gone racing for the shack. He was holding his fire for the close-quarter fighting he foresaw. He swept Duke aside into the abysmal shadow of the cliffs and shot forward in the obscurity. The firelight reached him, of course. It glistened on Duke's satin-smooth hide, and its gleams picked out Steve's figure and even sparkled on the metal-work of the saddle and bridle and spurs. But his first shots after his rocket-like entrance had not led to his being marked down as the target of many men. The Bar Circle hands who followed him opened a heavy fire, and it was inevitable that the fire of the rustlers was drawn upon them in return. And Steve, in the deeper darkness of the cliff base, plunged for the shack that abutted on the cliff wall itself.

He came into range just as the heavier firing of the Bar Circle men began; as the rustlers began to return it. One man, indeed, saw him riding in the shadow and fired viciously and continuously at him, but the others gave their thoughts and their lead to the now mostly dismounted men from Lucy's ranch. So that Steve came closer to the big shack in Hell Sink than anyone else, and with fewer bullets fired at him.

He was hardly more than two hundred yards from the shack when the corral fence gave way and turned loose a horde of panic-stricken animals. He was a hundred when the rustlers, their horses mostly gone, huddled together at bay. And then as the sound of firing rose to its utmost intensity Steve pounded into full view and went racing by the flank of the rustlers, both his guns at last spitting flame. And then lead whined all about him and splashed spitefully on the rocky walls in whose shadow he had ridden.

Swung almost out of sight on the farther side of Duke, he fired over his saddle. Crimson flashes were preludes to moaning missiles that browned the clump of desperate men. And suddenly Steve was past.

He plunged into the shelter of the bunk house, from before which the rustlers made their stand. Light shone through a window. And Steve reined in firecely, glanced through the window, swung one foot out of the stirrup, and went crashing through sash and glass alike.

He landed on the floor in a heap. His guns went off as he struck the ground, and then a bullet singed his jaw and an hilarious laugh sounded in the intervals of crackling firearms without.

Steve staggered up again. There were just two men inside the shack, both hilariously, hideously drunk and irresponsible even in the midst of the disaster that had come upon Hell Sink. One man had his gun raised and was in the act of slack-jawed, silly laughter. As Steve reached his feet, he fired again, still laughing.

The other held Lucy Harrison. The waist was torn from her throat. Her eyes were pools of agonized horror. Cord dangled from her wrists, as if the two drunken men were binding her fast against all possibility of further resistance. . . .

"Kill'm," whooped the man with the gun. "Hol' the girl, Pete, an' I'll show her some fancy shootin' ——"

The hammers of Steve's guns clicked on empty cylinders. The man with the gun laughed, and he began to sight carefully ——

With a leap, Steve smashed the lamp by a blow from one of his useless, empty guns. Blank darkness fell, but a few seconds later the light of the fires outside, shining through the windows, made the interior of the bunk house merely a place of deep and lurking shadows.

In those shadows Steve moved, catlike. The man with the gun swore tipsily. He saw Steve. His gun came up ——

"Bang!" But Steve had leaped again. A miss. The drunken marksman hiccoughed and peered blearily about him. A deadly game of hide-and-seek began in the dimly lighted bunk house. Steve could not stop to reload. If he were still for an instant the rustler, drunk as he was, would get home a shot. Twice he did fire, and the bellow of the gun was deafening in the enclosed space. Once Steve escaped the bullet by flinging himself flat as the drunken men whooped the instant before firing. Again, he dived across the rough board table as the wavering, wabbling revolver muzzle picked him out of the darkness.

The man who held Lucy laughed uproariously. He was moved to witty comments upon his companion's poor markmanship. Both were at that strange state of intoxication in which any difficult feat will be attempted with an air of preternatural gravity. The man with the gun scowled, and swung his wabbling weapon after Steve again. At any other time, under any other circumstances, he would have been a pitiful antagonist for Steve. But now Steve was to all intent and purposes disarmed. The drunken rustler, again, if sober would have killed Steve within seconds. But now

his brain was slowed up. His muscles were sluggish and uncertain. In the loaded weapon he had enough of advantage to make Steve's death a certainty. In the unsteadiness of his hands was just enough of delay, of uncertainty, to make the killing a ghastly parody of a cat-and-mouse tragedy in which Steve, all alertness and wiry muscles and lightning quickness, would be killed by the lurching man with the gun.

He staggered forward, swearing thickly. The gun bellowed, and stung Steve's skin. He turned to make a wild leap for safety—and he was cornered. The drunken man growled in tipsy satisfaction.

"Kill'm, Buck," said the other man owlishly, "an' come help get this ——— tied up. She's a hellcat an' we gotta tame her ——"

The gun came into line, wavering a little but not enough to spoil the aim. . . .

Steve flung one of his guns and followed it in a wild-cat charge. The gun struck with a crack, a blow the would have knocked out any man with sensibilities undulled. This man reeled back—and Steve was on top of him. They hit the earth with a crash that sounded in the bunk house in spite of the savage roaring of guns outside. Then it was fighting, battling, rolling over and over, the other man roused to that maniacal fury liquor will produce in some men.

"Hell!" said the man who held Lucy, in grieved surprise. "Y'ain't man 'nough to kill'm, Buck! I thought better of yuh. But I'll help yuh. Never deshert a frien' ——"

He drew his gun and stood by the inextricably tangled heap of arms and legs that was Steve, fighting for his own life and Lucy's, and the man who now battled with a snarling, drunken ferocity.

"Let'm get on top, Buck," said the man on his feet, owlishly. "I'll blow's head off. Let'm get on top. I'll kill'm for yuh."

He held the gun ready, gazing down with a tipsy earnestness at the pair who fought and gasped about his feet. Steve's faced stared upward, contorted with the effort he was making. The gun went down, its muzzle only inches from Steve's temple. . . .

With an incredible effort Steve jerked himself from under his opponent. The man who stood erect began to hunt absorbedly for his body to put a bullet into that. It was clumsy. It was absurd. It was even ridiculous to see the air of more than solemn absorption with which—as a drunken man will—he set about this task. But it meant that Steve would be killed in seconds.

Steve's hand shot out suddenly. It clawed at the leg of the standing man. There was a wrench ——

The standing man's foot slid from under him. And as he toppled and fell—with ludicrous efforts to maintain his balance—Steve managed to get the hold he wanted on the other. It was about the rustler's throat. And he suddenly heaved himself on top and began to pound the head he held against the floor, the legs of the rough board table. . . . Anything!

He stood up with a clubbed gun in his hand just as the second man began to try to get to his feet again. And Steve jumped him, striking ruthlessly with the gun. This second antagonist collapsed.

Then Steve turned to Lucy. Her pallor was ghastly, but she tried gallantly to smile. And then she swayed toward him and began to sob racking sobs upon his shoulder. Steve patted her back awkwardly.

"There, honey," he said clumsily. "You' all right now. You' all right! That's the Bar Circle boys outside, shootin' hell outa Swain's gang ——"

"But you—" said Lucy uncertainly, "they'll—shoot you too!"

Steve looked blank for an instant, and then smiled dryly.

"Sure," he conceded. "Maybe they'll try to shoot hell outa me too, presently. But I brought 'em here tied in their saddles, an' they' right much subdued where I'm concerned, now."

The sound of shooting outside changed suddenly. From a sort of focus just outside the door—into which bullets from Bar Circle guns crashed from time to time—it moved off at a rapid pace. Steve fumbled at the knots which bound Lucy's hands behind her back.

"They broke, then," he said encouragingly. "Our fellas got 'em on the run now."

Her hands were free. He began to reload his guns. He took a chance and peered out a window.

"Swain an' the rest are runnin'," he told her. "Bunched together an' shootin', but on the run an' our boys after 'em—those that are able to run."

He could see the Bar Circle men, outlined in the light of the fires, shifting their aim as if at a knot of desperately fleeing men.

"If they only think to hold the passage," said Steve anxiously.

"Steve!" Lucy was struggling for self-control. "You—you're in danger too. . . ."

Steve was staying close to Lucy. She still needed protection, perhaps, and someone had to be close by. But through the shattered

windows he could see the knot of fleeing rustlers plunge for the darkness. He saw a momentary confusion which he interpreted as their climbing of the fence which split Hell Sink into two parts. Some of the Bar Circle men were following savagely, but the Bar Circle also had Lucy to think of. Some of them were already coming in search of her.

"They're goin' to snag some horses over there," said Steve anxiously, "an' get away if we don't look out. . . ."

Bar Circle men approached the shack. Bullet-torn and shaken by the fighting, they came warily but resolutely toward the doorway. They'd take care of Lucy.

Steve plunged for the window through which he had so unceremoniously entered. Duke was outside, with a rifle roped to his saddle, Steve carrying no rifle holster. Steve scrambled through and to him. The knots slipped from the rifle, an instant's quick inspection, and he swung into the saddle again.

"Dawggone 'em," he said angrily, "those Bar Circle fellas ain't got any more sense'n jackrabbits! Up to the pass, Duke!"

Far away, amid the tumult made by frightened animals all about, there was a sudden, concerted drumming of hoofs. There is a distinct difference between the sound of a runing horse with and without a rider. Somewhere there were four or five horses being ridden together.

Steve frowned and threw off the safety of the rifle. A fire flamed up suddenly and showed a horse lifting itself over the dividing fence in a magnificent leap. Another was following it closely.

Steve brought up the rifle.

"Fire, burn bright," he muttered grimly. "We' gettin' evidence an' cleanin' spots off our reputation at the same time."

His rifle cracked. A miss. A second horse leaped the fence. A third, a fourth, a fifth. . . . Four riders, riding bareback on only braided horses, were racing for the pass that would lead to the open range. They were bent low. They beat their mounts unmercifully; spurred them desperately to get extra speed. And they were out of range of any sixgun in the Sink.

"These fellas, Duke," said Steve soberly, "they killed Jud Williams, an' that fella Hamby, an' the Sheriff, an' prob'ly a coupla Bar Circle fellas tonight. Hold still!"

The rifle cracked again. A man rolled off and his freed mount flung itself into a series of senseless bucks. The rifle went off once more—a spiteful, shattering detonation. A horse collapsed. Its rider went over its head and lay still. Again. . . .

"Like butchery," muttered Steve, "but Gawd knows who they butchered!"

Two riders remained, going like the wind for the gap in the rocky walls about Hell Sink. And Steve fired, and fired. . . . One figure flung up its arms suddenly, rode like a sack of meal for a dozen yards, and slid heavily from his horse's back. The other thundered on and into the rocky way that shut him off from all gun fire. He turned a demoniac, snarling face about the last instant before he vanished. The firelight struck it.

Swain.

Steve's eyes glowed savagely.

"Swain! C'mon, Duke! There are just two men we' got to find an' argue with. Swain an' Uncle Peter. Shake a hoof, horse! Shake a hoof!"

Duke bounded ahead, despite long trail-weariness. He had traveled many miles this day. Steve flung aside the rifle with the relief of one who discards an unfamiliar and undesired incumbrance, sank down in the saddle, and began to give Duke the help that only a born rider can give his horse. The big black animal went streaking across the Sink again—weary, but giving the best he had left in him.

Horse and man went tearing into the narrow way. They clattered through the abysmal blackness, with hollow echoings all about. They flung recklessly through the cleft in the everlasting hills. And they came out suddenly again beneath the roof of stars, with disturbed and milling cattle staring at them uneasily—and the distant, thudding hoofbeats of a single horse racing at a panic-stricken tempo in the exact direction of the Block H ranch.

"Let 'er go, Duke," drawled Steve. "Somebody's goin' to get killed now! Maybe Swain, an' maybe me, an' maybe Uncle Peter. But this black sheep aims to bleach his hide thorough while he's about it!"

He settled down to the chase. Through the wide cañon that led away from Big Valley itself. Echoes came faintly back from hillsides on either hand. Out into the rolling country that was the precursor of the level range yet beyond. Duke went gallantly, but he was very weary, always, far ahead, just at the limit of audibility, there was that distant drumming of a horse's hoofs that was Swain in flight.

"Got him some stuff cached, I rec'n," muttered Steve. "Goin to grab it an' duck for the Border. Things have been movin' too fast for him tonight. Duke, I hate to ask it, but we' got to move faster!"

On and on. . . . Once it seemed that the fleeing rider was lost in the darkness. But Duke made a desperate effort and caught up to the sound again.

Once, too, it seemed to Steve that he heard a nightherd singing off somewhere. A nasal, dismal melody concerned with the loves of Wall-eyed Slim Timberlin. That man would be riding a leisurely circuit of a bunch of cows, not knowing that night-herding save at roundup time would soon drop back to its normal unimportance through Steve's doing. His thoughts would be far from Swain and Steve Galt.

But it made Steve smile wryly as he rode to realize that outside of the Bar Circle men who were still alive in Hell Sink, that the whole range would aid Swain in lynching him if he were caught. And the men in Hell Sink, most likely, would protest only until Swain was included with Steve to be lynched.

Far to the east, a faint grayish light appeared in the sky. Duke, running gallantly with sweat streaming from his body and a colossal weariness weighting down his hoofs, became faintly visible as an outline against the yet darker earth. Far, far away a speck against the horizon was Swain. He dipped down a gentle incline and was lost to sight.

"He's got there," said Steve grimly. "Home to the Block H. Now it depends on how many men are left there, who gets killed."

His guns were loose in his holsters as Duke went heavily on, and when he reached the top of the slope which gave upon the ranch house, he drew them.

Then he rode down, guns out and leveled, watching for spurts of flame from windows or doors.

There was just one horse in sight. A roan mare, unsaddled. She stood with drooping head and spurmarks on her sides, close besides the ranch house proper. The door of the ranch house was open. No other sign of life, no other sound. . . .

Steve dismounted warily. His eyes were narrowed to slits. His guns ready, he went quietly up the steps. Across the porch. Into the hall. There was a little rustling noise within, in the room that had always been used as the ranch office. The bang of a drawer. Then a snarl of satisfaction in Swain's voice.

Steve slipped silently inside. When Swain straightened up and started for the door, he found himself looking into the muzzle of Steve's gun.

"Put 'em up," drawled Steve. "I' got right good reason for preferrin' to see you dead, but if you act real obedient——Drop that stuff in y'hands!"

Staring, speechless, snarling, Swain dropped to the floor whole wads and sheaves of bills—the proceeds of much unlawfulness. By its appearance, it had been separately hidden in small bundles in many places. Now he had gathered it together for the getaway Steve denied him.

"Right unkind of you," drawled Steve again, "to double-cross Uncle Peter like that. An' him an invalid. You ought to've thought of splittin' fifty-fifty with him, anyways."

He advanced grimly and twitched Swain's guns from their holsters.

"I'm kinda disappointed," he observed, "that I didn't have a good excuse to kill you. Outside the door, Swain! I rec'n I'll ride you back to Hell Sink. I ain't so doggoned popular that I can figure on carryin' you to jail. I wouldn't live to get you there. But the Bar Circle boys will 'tend to you."

Swain moved toward the hall and outer door, his hands clenched and his eyes showing a fury near to madness. There was no sound, no movement anywhere. The house seemed dead; desertd. Steve holstered one of his guns. The money scattered on the floor seemed to bother him. He stooped. . . .

Swain whirled, a tiny gun from under his shirt out and bearing——

The explosion that shattered the silence was deafening in the small room. It echoed and rang for seconds in the empty hall outside. It stunned the eardrums for an instant. Steve's ears were still numbed by it when Swain choked queerly, flung out his arms, and crashed to the floor.

"I didn't know he had a shoulder gun," said Steve slowly, "or I'd have taken it. An' he wouldn't 've tried that, I rec'n. But it's goin' to be right convenient——"

He blew the smoke thoughtfully from the muzzle of his weapon. He looked about him tiredly.

"Considerin'," he observed, "I'll go see Uncle Peter."

Suddenly, now, he heard the babbling of a voice. A door opened somewhere upstairs. A voice said mildly:

"Steve?"

Steve started. Then he said:

"It's me."

"Come on up, Steve. This heah dam' Miguel needs to be kicked an' I ain't got the energy to do it. You 'tend to it for me."

Steve went up the steps two at a time. The open door—to which Miguel with handcuffs on his wrists clung weakly—opened upon the room which had always been occupied by Uncle Peter. But the

voice was another one entirely. It was one that Steve had never expected to hear again.

He went inside, and Miguel cringed and babbled abjectly, and the Sheriff eased himself back on the bed. A huge bandage disfigured his forehead.

"Somebody creased me," he said mildly, " back in the jail. You sure put in a busy night, Steve! I remember startin' to tell you somethin' about warnin' Lucy, an' somethin' hit me, an' I come to with the jail right much of a wreck. When I wabbled out, they tol' me you'd played hell with the gang that wanted to lynch you, an' that you'd got away. Most everybody was out chasin' you, but I scared up three-four fellas an' come heah. We caught three Block H han's. When y' Uncle Peter wasn't on the premises, they got scared an' talked right free. Y' Uncle Peter's dead, Steve. Been dead a year an' more."

"Yeah?" asked Steve uninterestedly.

"Uh-huh," said the Sheriff mildly. "He was right much of a invalid, an' Swain was runnin' everything, so Swain was doin' some heavy rustlin' on his own. He musta had the ol' fella right much under his thumb. When he died, though, the game looked like it was up. But somehow he p'suaded Oliver to help him cover things up. They didn't let on about the ol' fella dyin' so you couldn't come an' claim the ranch. An' natural, they went in for rustlin' wholesale, then. They had to get all they could before the game busted up on them."

Steve said nothing. But he was beginning to understand a great deal. This was what Oliver, in his desperation, had started to tell Dick Harrison. And Lucy's father had gone into a rage at the crookedness of the trick——

"I rec'n," said the Sheriff, "theah's goin' to be a kinda change of public opinion about you, Steve. You own the Block H now, y'know. An' as far as the killin' of Dick Harrison is concerned, I found y'boots——"

Steve looked up, his eyes level.

"Dick Harrison," he said evenly, "was killed by Swain."

"But I foun'—" the Sheriff began mildly.

"Oliver's dead," said Steve. "I know how it happened an' all about it. But Oliver's dead. An' so is Swain. Dick Harrison was killed by Swain."

The Sheriff frowned a little. He looked at Steve perplexedly. Then he shrugged.

"All right, if y'insist," he said dryly. "I'll have to move those

boots an' a coupla—uh—pieces of other evidence. But we'll let it go at that. I caught Miguel las' night, tryin' to get somethin' out of the office downstairs. Some of Swain's cached cash, I rec'n. I han'cuffed him to the door an' told him to wake me up if anybody came, or I'd jail him. The boys I brought heah went off to town with the Block H boys we caught. They' comin' back with as many other men as they can raise. We were aimin' to raid Hell Sink this mornin'."

"It's raided," said Steve.

He sat down and began to roll a cigarette, thoughtfully. The Sheriff eyed him peculiarly.

"Dawggone yuh, Steve!" he said vexedly. "Y'know I'm bustin' with curiosity! You raided Hell Sink an' Oliver's dead an' Swain's killed an' you own this heah ranch now, an' y'sit theah lookin' dumb an' gloomy——"

"I'm thinkin' about a lot of things," said Steve rather wearily. "Oliver, for one. I rec'n he'd have been a right good sort if things had been different."

"Maybe so," admitted the Sheriff. "Yor uncle was a funny fella. He was durned cranky an' he wa'n't a amiable character, any ways you looked at him. But I always felt——"

"Swain got him under his thumb," said Steve heavily. "He treated me right rough. Maybe he wouldn't have changed, but maybe he would. Findin' out he's dead an' Swain was rustlin' under cover of his name makes me feel kinda different about him. It's hard to hold a grudge against a dead man."

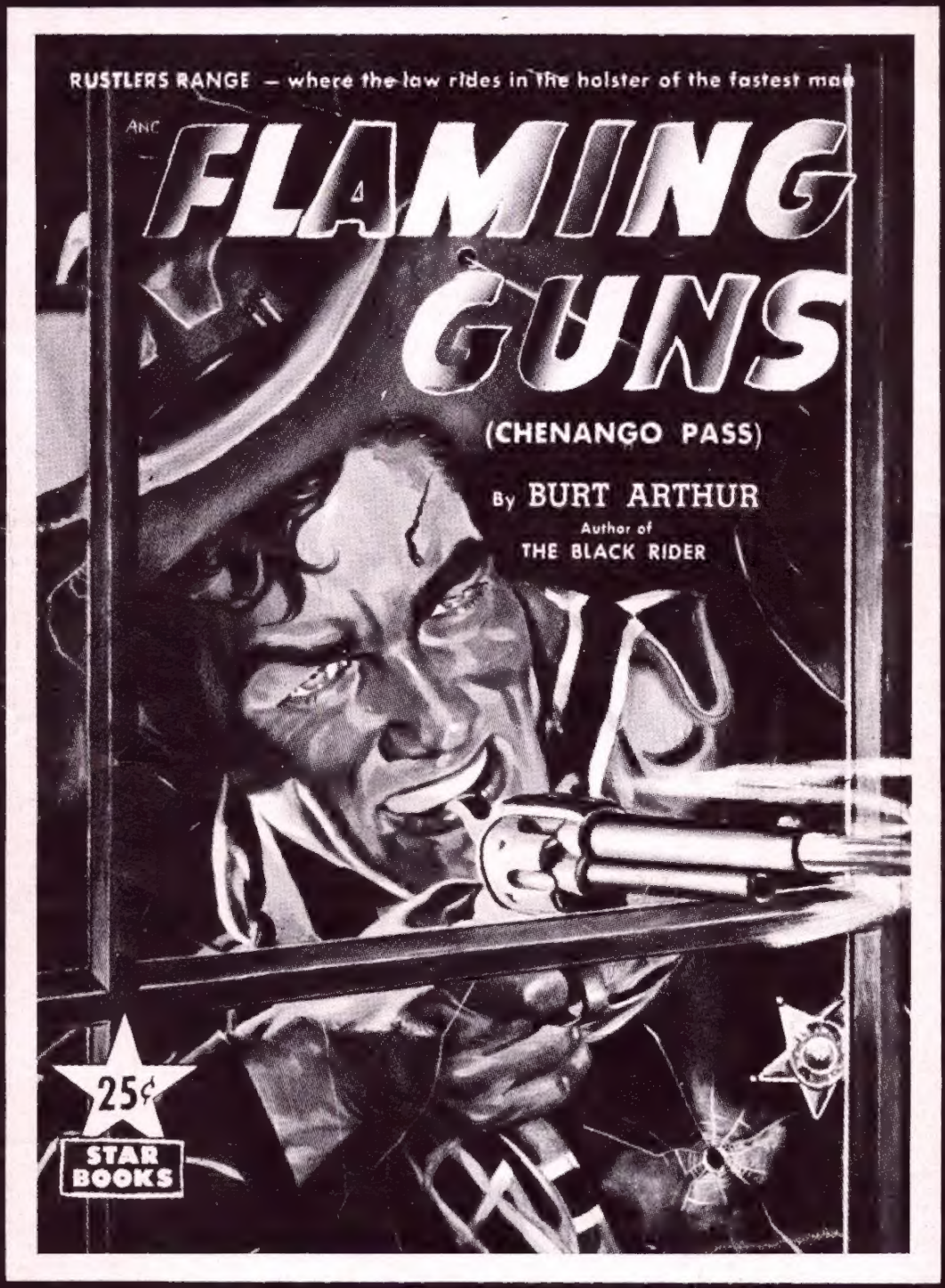
"Yeah," said the Sheriff. "If y'won't talk now, y'won't talk. I'll go ridin' with you an' find out what's happened. But speakin' of grudges—you better practice not holdin' grudges against live men. Theah' goin' to be a lot o' folks sorry for the way they' treated you, but they'll see y'in hell before they'll say so."

"Yeah," said Steve. "It don't matter."

"They'll act different, though," the Sheriff assured him. "Things are goin' to be a lot different now. Come along!"

Steve rose rather heavily. He went to the window and looked out over the Block H range. Despoiled of its cattle: run down in every way; its hands known rustlers who were either dead or bound for prison. It was not, perhaps, a luring prospect. But Steve did not think of that. He watched the sun, a vivid crimson ball, rolling up over the hills to the east.

"It's sunrise," said Steve quietly. "More ways than one. I've got to get back to Lucy. All right, Sheriff. Let's go!"



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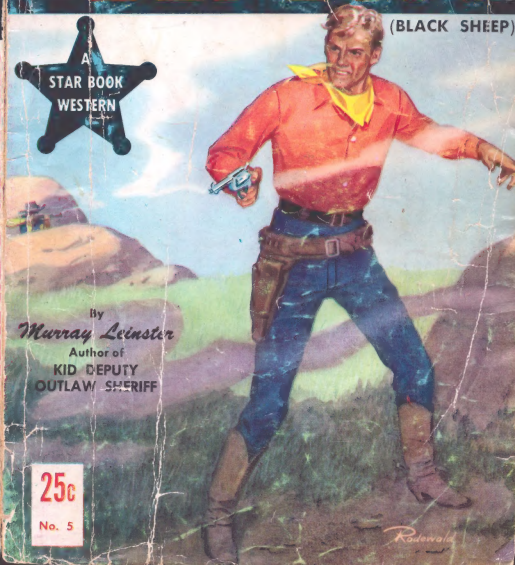

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